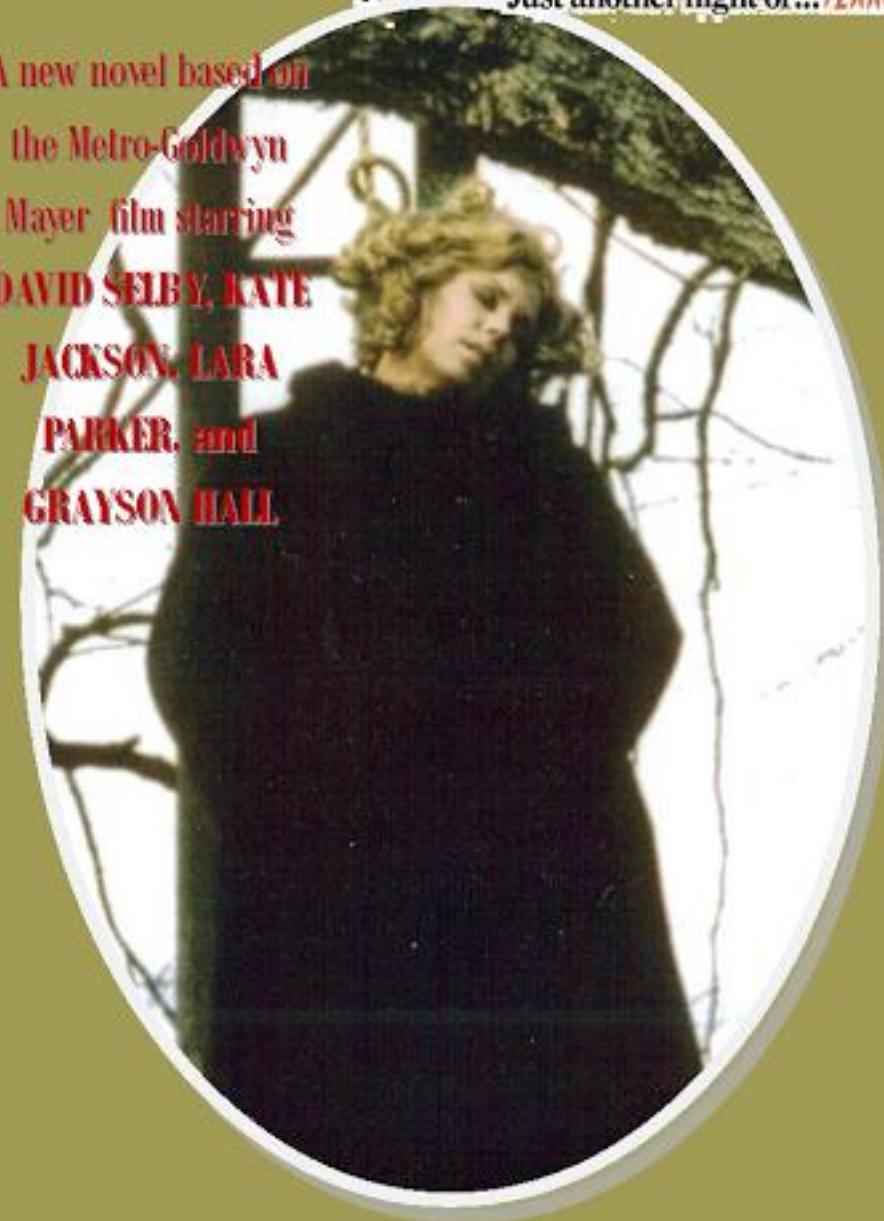


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GOLD EDITION

# Night of Dark Shadows

Just another night of... **TERROR**

A new novel based on  
the Metro-Goldwyn  
Mayer film starring  
**DAVID SELBY, KATE  
JACKSON, LARA  
PARKER, and  
GRAYSON HALL**



This work is dedicated to my friend Diane Eckert to whom I'm indebted for her editorial assistance.

Many thanks to Laramie Dean for the cover image.

## Prologue

He cursed his fortune. Rain-drenched and chilled by the howling wind, his hopes were raised yet again. The lightning illuminated an oncoming pickup. Praying to whatever god would listen, he extended his thumb and tried to look as pathetic and nonthreatening as possible. The truck whizzed past him, its tires spraying him with icy water. "Hey you dirty ...! I'm lost, man! I'm lost!" His plea fell on deaf ears.

He was alone on the deserted stretch of road, meandering between two nearly impenetrable lines of trees. An argument with a previous rider had resulted in him being dumped unceremoniously into the storm. Another lightning flash lit up the sky, revealing a mansion seated atop the steep hill. It was at once both repelling and inviting. Crafted of grey stone, it resembled a castle with a tall tower reaching out to grasp the sky. A momentary urge to turn and run was suppressed by his urgent need for shelter. The refugee sloshed his way up the muddy hill toward the manor that was both eerily beautiful and terrifying.

He checked various entrances into the mansion; as expected, they were all locked. His glimpses in the windows told him the building was abandoned. All the furniture had been covered, and there were no signs of any recent habitation. He was about to resort to breaking into one of the French windows when the handle of one of them broke off, and it opened with a creak of protest. He launched himself across the threshold, barely avoiding a spill as his foot slipped on a wet patch of stone.

Once inside, the interloper began to explore the deserted manse. He'd always been contemptuous of authority and was not in the best of moods. A vase caught his eye. On an instinctual level, he labeled it a symbol of an oppressive authoritarian culture. With one gleeful motion, he hurled it to the floor. Its crash coincided with a peal of thunder. He was about to break something else, but greed and a cold chill overtook him simultaneously. These things were here for the taking. An enterprising person could pawn them for God only knows how much. He shivered and decided to leave such thoughts for a later time. Warmth was a more immediate concern.

He was soon disappointed. The house was steeped in an all-pervading chill. He commandeered some of the furniture covers, wrapping them around himself. The effort warmed him a bit. With a chuckle, he imagined himself draped in fine robes, the lord of the manor. His gaze fell upon a well-stocked bar. A nearly full bottle of brandy beckoned to him. Throwing back his head, he drank deeply, welcoming the sting of the streaming liquid. It gradually saturated his body with euphoric warmth of both body and spirit. Poorly mimicking a posh British accent, he called out, "POOLE! We'll be having brandy in the drawing room, and do prepare bedrooms for the weekend's guests!" He chuckled as he recalled the poor, suffering butler. **Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde** had always been one of his favorite films. He wandered aimlessly a bit more, downing gulps of brandy as he went. Eventually, exhaustion and alcohol overcame him, and he collapsed on a sofa, allowing the nearly empty, but capped bottle to fall to the floor.

While he slept, the storm gradually dissipated and the wind decelerated, the howl decreasing to a low moan. A pulsating, iridescent light flickered in the tower. It hovered there for several minutes then drifted down the stairs, slowly but unerringly toward the sleeping form of the intruder. The effects of the liquor gradually diminished, and he awoke by degrees, dimly aware of the light and the feeling that he was being observed. "Hey, who's there? I got company?" No answer. He made his way toward the landing and called out again, "Hey, who's there? Where's that light coming from?"

He lurched unsteadily forward, attempting to meet the light at the foot of the stairs. "Where did you go? Who's up there?" Maddeningly, it retreated back up. He mounted the steps in slow, but determined pursuit. It paused, bathing him in its intense glow. "There it is again! What the hell is going on?" It diminished again and backed away. He continued to follow the radiance up the stairs and into one of the deserted rooms.

Something swift and indistinct reached out to him from the light. With feline grace, precision and swiftness, it lashed out raking his face with scratches. He screamed, clutched his face and stumbled backward as it attacked again. He backed away nearly bumping into the dark silhouette of a man. A flashlight was trained on his eyes, blinding him. As he tried to croak out a plea for help, the figure drew a club and bludgeoned him viciously across his temple, downing him instantly. As he lay dying, his last

sight was the lean, hungry visage of his attacker glaring down at him. He was joined by an attractive middle-aged woman whose sharp, angular features registered approval.

## Chapter 1

The white convertible made its way up the hill; the sun had been smiling sweetly down on it. The driver, a young man with wavy brown hair managed to steal the occasional glance at the scenery but had to focus the bulk of his attention on the road. The woman with him, a brunette who was a gorgeous epitome of the girl next door, squinted, trying to get the first glimpse of their destination. She finally pointed triumphantly, displaying the smile that had convinced the driver to propose to her, "Look!" Her husband stole a moment's attention away from the road and gazed up at the house on the hill. She exclaimed, "What a garret!" The mansion, in the light of day, seemed inviting and peaceful. The scent of the last of the wildflowers still lingered in the air as birds chirped peacefully. The woman imagined that some of them were probably nesting in some of the tower's nooks and crannies. She glanced at him, her doe like eyes full of love and adoration.

Her husband smiled, "I keep telling you no one can afford to paint unless he is an heir."

She rested her head on his shoulder, "I think it's incredible you were around for all those years, and I didn't even know you!" Her gentle countenance registered total contentment.

He regarded her fondly, "You wouldn't have liked me then. I was mean and surly." His blue eyes twinkled mischievously, his lean features sporting a crooked grin.

She was uncertain how to interpret this revelation. His tone was ambivalent. She broke the awkward silence with a laugh and replied, "I still can't believe it's really Collinwood!" Her lovely face registered childlike wonder and reflected the sun's warmth.

"Well, if I got the directions right, it is."

Thick trees once again obscured their view. "You can't even see the house from here. How much land is there?"

"Oh only about 200 acres", he answered. "There ... look at it now."

The trees thinned again and they were treated to their first close-up look at Collinwood. The gigantic stone structure dominated the horizon. "Oh ... Quentin," her mouth hung open momentarily. The monolith loomed larger and larger until it totally dominated their view. "What do you want to bet I turn into one of those women you see in **House & Garden**."

"Yeah, I can see it now, Mrs. Quentin Collins in her fashionable jeans sitting at her 18<sup>th</sup> Century rosewood desk making out menus for the week." Tracy laughed as he continued, "We have a housekeeper, you know."

"Oh great, I'll bet she looks just like Mrs. Danvers!"

"I'm sure she does." Quentin had stopped the car, and they emerged, stretching and flexing tired muscles.

"Well, it solves one problem. She can probably do everything, and I can spend my day arranging flowers all day."

Quentin opened the trunk and retrieved their luggage. Tall and lanky, he easily hefted the weight of their belongings and headed for the front entrance of Collinwood, "And loving me."

"And loving you," Tracy agreed. Quentin, on impulse gently dropped the bags and swept his new bride off her feet. The two laughed as he whisked her over the threshold.

They were interrupted by a sweet, almost singsong voice. "Mr. and Mrs. Collins, welcome to Collinwood. I'm Carlotta Drake." Tracy blushed as Quentin set her on her feet. Carlotta's smile would have seemed warm, except for the fact that her eyes seemed to regard them critically. Tracy momentarily wondered who she was. Quentin had mentioned a housekeeper, but this woman was dressed more appropriately for a dinner party. Her attire was lavish and colorful, not something one might expect a domestic servant to wear. Her eyes were lined heavily with mascara, and makeup was also liberally applied. Rouge accentuated the hollows beneath her prominent cheekbones. It gave the impression of one who was desperately clinging to her youth.

"Thank you, Miss Drake."

"Hello, Carlotta," Tracy offered her hand to the older woman. It was accepted with grace that belied her humble station in the household.

"It's so good to have you here. I do hope everything will be to your liking, Mrs. Collins." She stood aside allowing them to enter. "If you leave your bags there, they will be attended to." With an air of authority, she gestured for them to follow, and she proceeded to conduct a tour of their new home. The newlyweds had little to say, unaccustomed as they were to such grandeur.

She led them into an ornately furnished drawing room. The high, vaulted ceilings made Tracy feel tiny and insignificant. Priceless heirlooms from every generation of the Collins family filled the spacious chamber. Tracy was awed by a glass case that held ornate figurines of pairs of animals beside an intricately-carved ark. Each creature had been painstakingly and realistically crafted by an artisan. The newlyweds were bowled over by the conspicuous display of unimagined wealth. Tracy wasn't sure, but she thought Carlotta had glanced disapprovingly at her when she had reached out to touch a replica of a clipper ship that was displayed on an antique table. Her gaze fell upon some of the overstuffed chairs and the loveseat. The workmanship was beautiful, but Tracy doubted if she could ever curl up with a book and feel comfortable in this room.

Quentin was busy appraising the sculptures and paintings along the walls. He had created a brief but tense awkward silence earlier when he'd asked about the distant relatives from whom he'd inherited the house. Carlotta would only say that it had been a "deeply tragic time that is best forgotten." Quentin respected her wishes and did not pry into the matter further. "Mrs. Stoddard, before her death, had tea served here every afternoon."

Tracy winced inwardly at the thought of her spilling the contents of a teacup onto the slightly faded, but still colorful, upholstery.

"I'm afraid that's one tradition we won't keep." Quentin's reply provoked a subtle but undeniable expression of disapproval from the older woman. He was sitting at the piano, idly plucking out a melody that was stuck in his head.

Sensing the tension, Tracy jovially added, "Oh no! We can't let the house down! We must call Claire and Alex and invite them to tea in the drawing room with the lord of the manor!"

Tracy asked, "Did you tell the Jenkins we'd be here today?" Carlotta seemed momentarily distracted, engrossed in the ditty Quentin was playing. "Carlotta, did you tell the Jenkins we'd be here today?"

Tracy's repeated query jerked the older woman out of her reverie. "No, I didn't know that's what you wanted. Come; let me show you the rest of the house." With an air of authority, she gestured for them to follow her. "Collinwood was built by Joshua Collins in the late 1700s." Again she was in her element, regaling them with tales about each room of the house, most of them set in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Neither of the couple asked about recent history again.

Carlotta whisked them into a myriad of rooms, each more resplendent than the last. There was a library whose antique shelves were bursting with tomes that spanned the ages from the earliest days of printing to the present. Tracy wondered about the little girl who'd read the Nancy Drew mysteries in the '50s or more recently, the little boy who'd favored the adventures of Tom Swift. Carlotta's imperious gaze fell upon her, reminding Tracy of the stern librarians of her own childhood. She hastily replaced the books on the shelf and followed her guide and husband out into the corridor.

Carlotta gestured airily, "As a child, I used to hide here. They had so many parties then. All the guests were so elegantly dressed." Her eyes looked off into the distance as she continued, "And the candles were always burning."

"You lived here as a child?" Tracy's question jolted her back into the present.

"Yes, my mother was the housekeeper."

Quentin had wandered away from the tour and was peering up a flight of stairs. "What's up there?"

"Oh, nothing you'd be interested in now."

"Is that the tower I saw from the outside?"

“Yes, it’s used for storage now.” Quentin paused at the landing as Carlotta and Tracy continued on their way. After a moment Carlotta, glanced back at him. Taking the hint, he followed them through the maze of corridors and into the dining room.

Tracy’s jaw hung open. The table looked as if it might be suitable for King Arthur and Queen Guinevere to hold a feast for the knights of the realm. Carlotta droned on, but Tracy was oblivious to her. She could only marvel at the craftsmanship that had gone into creating such a splendid piece of art. The sides were adorned with carvings of angels. “This is too much,” she thought. “I can’t take my meals on this.” The shiny surface cast her reflection almost as vividly as a mirror. Although she was stylishly clad, she felt frumpy in the presence of such splendor. Her gaze fell to the carpet. Cornucopias overflowing with waves of delicacies were on display. Although undeniably very ancient, the fine fibers still retained their vibrant colors. There was only trace evidence of wear apparent anywhere on the rug. She was chilled again at the thought of spilling something, perhaps wine, irrevocably marring the antique artistry.

Carlotta regarded her with an indulgent grin and pointed. “There’s a pantry through that door. Recent members of the family often took their meals there.” Her demeanor suggested to Tracy that the older woman was equally uncomfortable with the thought of her eating here as well. She glanced at her husband who was displaying no signs of discomfiture. Quite the contrary, Quentin was confidently surveying the room, boldly inspecting its contents. He reached for a fine, delicate crystal decanter. He examined it appreciatively for a moment. Carlotta did not seem to resent his actions. In fact, her manner indicated tacit approval. Quentin replaced the decanter and nodded, signaling to Carlotta that he was ready to continue the tour. Following his cue, she led them along a maze of corridors and up a flight of stairs.

“The master bedroom is this way. It has an excellent view of the front grounds.” Tracy doubted she’d remember how make her way to this room again at bedtime. Although the bedroom was finely furnished, Tracy was relieved to discover that it was not nearly as intimidating as the rest of the house. The spreads were obviously expensive, but neither looked as fragile or as irreplaceable as most of the contents of their new home. This room had been outfitted for everyday living. The dresser looked like something one might find in a five-star hotel, not a museum. Tracy could imagine herself storing her clothes in it. The nightstand had the same elegant but inviting look about it. In spite of being fully appointed, the room looked stark and bare. At one time no doubt, photographs of recent members of the family had been on display. Their removal had left a vacuum that was slightly depressing. Tracy made up her mind to fill it with pictures of her own family and Toby, the beloved dog she’d grown up with. She hoped Quentin would also have images of his branch of the Collins family. She made up her mind that they would start making their mark on Collinwood here.

Her resolution was interrupted by Carlotta who ushered them away from their living quarters into another room directly across the hall. If they were impressed with the rest of the house, the gallery bowled them over. It was majestic both in size and furnishings. Huge windows dominated the far wall, giving them a panoramic view of the grounds. Portraits of Collins forebears adorned the other walls. Again, Quentin found himself appraising rather than just appreciating the art in this room. “I have a feeling my ancestors wouldn’t have bought my work.”

“Quentin’s paintings are very abstract.”

Carlotta’s eyebrows arched, “You’re a painter? How interesting.” Quentin stopped at the portrait of a lovely blonde woman. She was exquisitely beautiful with perfect features that looked as if they had been etched from marble. Her eyes seemed to compel him to stare into them, pale blue, almost hypnotic. Now that he’d noticed this piece, it seemed to dominate the room, looking down upon them like a sentinel. Tracy also admired the beauty of the subject but thought her expression suggested a coldness or perhaps even cruelty.

“Is she one of the family?”

Carlotta nodded in answer to Quentin’s query. “Yes she is. Her name is Angelique Collins. She died in 1810.”

Awed, Tracy remarked, “She’s beautiful”. She turned her attention away from the portrait to look out the window. “Carlotta, I think this is my favorite room. The view is incredible!”

"I've prepared a salad for supper. Shall I serve it here?"

"Oh yes, would you?" Carlotta nodded to her and left the room. The sun had decided to peek out again and favored the lawn and trees with golden light. The leaves twinkled as if stars had landed upon them. Quentin abandoned the image of Angelique and joined Tracy at the window. His gaze was drawn to a squirrel scampering up the tree. A smile was aborted when it disappeared from sight. It did not scurry behind a branch nor did it race away faster than his eye could follow. It simply was not there. The brilliant colors had also diminished to near monochrome. The tree, devoid of leaves, was damp and slick in the heavy drizzle. His mind's eye was diverted by something swinging above his line of sight. He gasped. It was the form of a woman suspended from a rope, gently swaying in the heavy breeze. Her long, ankle-length dress suggested a bygone day.

Dimly, he was aware that Tracy was speaking. "It's almost like living in a museum. Isn't it?" Mildly concerned, Tracy reached out to touch her husband's arm. "Quentin." Immediately the scene shifted, and the squirrel was again playing on the lower branches, its brown fur appearing yellowish in the brilliant light. "Darling, what's wrong? What are you thinking about?"

He blinked several times before deciding how to answer her. "What? Oh I don't know ... just daydreaming, I guess." He put his arm around her, and they enjoyed the spectacular sight silently until Carlotta returned with the tray.

The day had been long and exhausting, so they decided to turn in early. Although the bed was ornate and a work of art, Tracy secretly wished she could have their old bed back. This mattress was a bit too firm and stiff for her to be totally comfortable. "I still think we're very naughty. We should have at least called the Jenkins'."

"They'll understand", Quentin answered, buttoning his pajamas and preparing to join her in bed. "Are you going to be happy here?"

She cuddled close to him, "Yes, if you are." She kissed him goodnight and hoped he'd take the hint. She was already nodding off, despite the unyielding mattress. Her eyelids grew heavy.

"I don't know why, but I almost feel like I've come home."

"That's good", she mumbled and rolled over. This time he got the message and let her drift off into a deep slumber. Quentin felt at ease in the total silence of his castle. The open window let in only a slight, inaudible breeze, and the curtains were subject to only the tiniest flutters. By degrees, his feelings of contentment gave way to sleep.

Gradually, the wind picked up. By 2:00 a.m., the drapes were doing a ghostly dance, swaying in and out, powered by the accelerating wind. The moans and howls brought Quentin back to consciousness. He listened to the wind, feeling as if it were summoning him. It was a moonless night, so Tracy was invisible to him. The only evidence of her presence was the sound of her regular breaths. He closed his eyes for a few minutes to allow sleep to overtake him again. When it didn't happen, he opened his eyes again, unperturbed. He was relishing the oddly familiar sensation of being in this house, his house. No, his mansion!

Suddenly a soft glow illuminated the phantom cloth swaying in the wind. It undulated, increasing and decreasing slightly in intensity. He frowned, more than a little curious. Slowly, so as not to wake Tracy, he got out of bed and made his way to the window. The light emanated from the tower. He was puzzled. It was too pervasive to be candlelight. Yet its dimness belied an electrical source. The light was adequate enough for him to make his way out of the room without stumbling yet not intense enough for him to perceive color.

The tower door was open, allowing the light to guide him up the stairs. Unbeknownst to Quentin, he was being observed. The tall, lithe, hawk-faced man gripped his club tightly. His eyes were narrow slits, blazing with hatred. He resisted the urge to follow Quentin up the tower stairs. Instead he stood, immobile, unsure about what he'd do when Quentin re-emerged from the tower.

Tracy lay alone, half awake. She reached out for Quentin and was mildly dismayed to discover that he was not there. Unwilling to get up to investigate, she chose to turn over and allow herself to fall back into sweet sleep.

Quentin was dimly aware that he was being kissed on the cheek. "Quentin." He rolled over, face down on the pillow, attempting to thwart any more displays of affection from Tracy. Undeterred, she resorted to shaking him gently. "Come on. Are you going to sleep away your first day here?" He rolled over, slightly shaken and confused. He blinked several times, momentarily confused and unsure of where he was. Tracy was a bit hurt by the fact that he did not greet her with his customary easy smile. It was almost as if he didn't recognize her. "Good morning!" She exhaled a small sigh of relief when this elicited a smile from him.

"Hi. Wake me in two hours. I'm beat." He yawned and started to turn over. Tracy stopped the maneuver with a kiss.

"Serves you right for wandering around last night without me," she chided gently.

"You imagined it."

Her eyes narrowed, trying to decide if he was being truthful. "We haven't been married that long. I know when you're not in my bed."

"Well, I was. I was dreaming strange dreams all night."

"I won't fight with you. Ever. Now get up." She turned on her heel and left. Quentin lay there for several long minutes vainly trying to remember his "dreams." They were on the periphery of his consciousness. Unlike most dreams, the indistinct images did not fade, and yet they remained there, frustratingly beyond his reach. Finally, he gave up and obediently arose to face the new day.

## Chapter 2

Tracy sipped her coffee as birds chirped cheerily outside the window of the gallery. While she still felt more than a bit intimidated by the grandeur of her new home, she felt as she'd never tire of this view. The massive trees with their splendid sea of green gave way to the metallic blue ocean beyond. The rhythmic pounding of the surf combined with the birdsong had a calming effect.

She was jolted out of her reverie by the snarling of Dobermans. Straining on the leashes, mouths flecked with foam, they looked up at her with fury. The man holding their taut leashes was lean and regarded her with an unpleasant expression that was a mixture of contempt, amusement, and lust.

Still shaken, she was startled by Carlotta. "More coffee, Mrs. Collins?" Tracy didn't answer; she peered back out the window. He uttered a command that was inaudible to her. Instantly, the dogs ceased their noise and were still, although they continued glare at her. "Is something wrong, Mrs. Collins?"

"There's someone down there staring at me. Who is it, Carlotta?"

"There's no one there."

Tracy turned her attention back to the window. Only the trees stared back. "There was a man with two black dogs."

"Oh Gerard. Gerard Stiles. My nephew. He's the caretaker-handyman. He keeps the horses too. I don't know what I'd do without him."

"Oh. I see. Well, it was just that those dogs ..."

"Those dogs are very important to the security of the estate, madam." She pursed her lips and paused for a long moment to emphasize that the subject was closed. "Now is there anything I can get you?"

Tracy blushed, hoping she didn't seem as silly to Carlotta as she felt. "Oh no. Nothing. Everything is just fine."

Carlotta nodded curtly and took the tray back to the kitchen. She found Gerard filling his thermos with coffee. "Do you know what happened last night?" Carlotta did not deign to reply to his query. "Do you?!" Gerard's angular features were twisted with rage and anguish. Stubble from two days of neglect darkened his visage. He exposed tobacco- stained teeth to continue but was silenced by a wave of Carlotta's hand.

Carlotta's expression was even harder than usual. "Everything has changed. You must accept that now."

"I was good enough until he came around!"

Gerard's petulant tone irritated Carlotta. "Go to the stables. He'll be there soon to ride." Gerard hesitated. She continued to head off any more defiance. "I've told you that everything is different now!" Gerard turned on his heel and stormed out of the room.

Cursing, he heard his dogs barking and growling with barely contained aggression at ... him. Quentin was approaching the stables cautiously, his progress arrested by the two territorial canines. Gerard thought about setting them on him but feared the consequences. SHE would not be pleased. Not pleased at all. "Inside, boys." The dogs instantly obeyed his command, turning tail and disappearing into the kennel adjacent to the stable.

"I'd keep them chained if I were you." Quentin extended his hand, "I'm Mr. Collins." Gerard stared at the proffered hand, and regarded it the way he would a cobra. He swallowed his pride and shook his employer's hand."

Wanting to avoid small talk and the implied command about the dogs, he asked, "You ride well?"

"I used to when I was a kid. But it's been a long time. You'd better give me an easy one."

Gerard gestured to a large black stallion and forced a pleasant smile. "You ought to be able to handle this one."

Quentin patted him appreciatively, "A good-looking horse."

"Yeah, his name is Ulysses. Just give him his head, and you'd think you were in a rocking chair." As Quentin mounted the horse, Gerard muttered, "I saw your wife today."

"Yes?"

Flustered, not wanting to betray interest and annoyed that he'd blurted out his thoughts, he stammered out, "She rides?" Quentin focused a long, questioning glance at him. "I, I said she rides, doesn't she?"

"Yes, but not today. I'll be back in few hours." With that, the horse turned, and they rode off on the path leading through the woods. Quentin's mount was proving to be more difficult than he'd been led to believe. A couple of times, he'd bucked a bit and Quentin had barely managed to keep his balance. Quentin surprised himself by matching the horse's aggression with equal force. He pulled back on the reins, forcing the horse's head to the side, exerting painful pressure on his mouth. He relaxed a bit; the horse continued to rebel. His head was jerked again to the side with more force than Quentin had intended. "You will obey me!" Again, Quentin was taken aback by the fury in his voice and the viciousness with which he flicked the reins. This time the horse submitted and ceased his efforts to throw him.

They had reached a truce and rode pleasantly for the next hour or so, meandering along the wooded paths. Quentin ceded control to the animal temporarily, allowing it to go where it pleased, confident that he could regain the upper hand anytime he wished. Again, he wondered where this confidence had originated. As a child, he'd ridden fairly well, but most of his mounts had been gentle mares or geldings. He'd handled this recalcitrant mount more like a pro and not like the out-of-practice amateur he was.

Off in the distance, he thought he heard the tolling of a bell. The sky appeared greyer, despite the fact that he felt the intense sun's rays pummeling him. They rode up to an old cemetery. As they made their way through, Quentin heard a harsh, grating voice intoning a eulogy. "Dust to dust, ashes to ashes." The preacher was surrounded by mourners sheltering themselves under umbrellas. The reverend was a corpulent man with fleshy, sagging jowls. His unkempt hair was stringy and carelessly swept across his forehead. There was no hint of sorrow or compassion in his voice or manner. In fact, his manner seemed more appropriate for an angry sermon of censure.

"Oh Lord, we beseech you to have mercy on this sinner, for we all sin, knowing the mercy of our heavenly father. So we command to him the flesh and spirit of Angelique Collins, beloved wife to Gabriel, loyal and loving sister-in-law to Laura." At the mention of the last name, a woman laughed, her eyes flashing with amusement at a private joke. Although she was lovely, it was obvious her looks were fading, and she was heading speedily into middle-age. Pasty white makeup had been liberally applied to hide age lines. These futile efforts had the opposite effect, calling attention to her inevitable decline. Her looks were also marred by an expression of disillusionment and bitterness that was permanently tattooed

on her countenance. She continued to issue the bitterly triumphant laughter. The man near her was also blond. His mane of curly locks was wound even tighter than usual by the humidity provided by the driving rain. His shifty eyes darted back and forth between the woman and the other mourners. His even features were marred by uneasiness. He shot her a nervous, reproving glance and exerted minor pressure on her arm. She shot the fidgeting man a look of defiance and contempt and continued to giggle. The eulogizer raised his voice in an effort to drown her out, "Angelique Collins has departed this life for a far better one. A world without sorrow or pain."

The woman responded by increasing the volume and vigorousness of her laughter. Her hysteria produced cracks in her ghostly youth mask. The cackles were only silenced when the preacher glared at her disapprovingly. Their eyes locked for several seconds before she relented. "And so we commend her spirit to a just and loving God. Amen."

Most of the "mourners" appeared to be bored, unconcerned, or downright hostile to the dearly departed. The exceptions were a frail, thin child who was sobbing uncontrollably and a woman, most likely her mother, who was vainly trying to console her. The little girl held something lovingly in her hands. The other adults regarded her behavior with indulgent disapproval.

Quentin's attentions were jerked away from this scene as he heard his name called. His head swiveled in the direction of the caller. He'd not noticed that the path intersected with a road 20 yards or so away from the cemetery. The sunlight again shone brightly as he beheld the smiling, familiar face of Claire Jenkins waving to him out of the open window of her car. When he turned his attention back to the gravesite, all trace of the mourners had vanished and the clear inscription on the tombstone was now barely legible. With a bit of reluctance, he guided the horse toward the car to meet his best friend's wife.

Less than an hour later, Quentin was sitting in a cozy chair in one of the small cottages on the Collins estate. Claire and Alex Jenkins had been invited to stay in Collinwood, but Alex had replied that "Living in a place like that would give me the heebie jeebees. I write about ghosts; I don't particularly want to live with them." He also added that the privacy would give them time to work on their next novel. The cottage was intimate, comfortable, and relatively modern in its décor. Quentin felt as if he'd changed out of a tuxedo into well-worn street clothes. Although he'd felt very much at home in Collinwood, the more humble surroundings of the cottage were a welcome respite. He'd also not realized how incredibly tired he was. He wasn't convinced that Tracy was correct, that he'd been wandering about the house much of the evening. Either way though, he'd not slept well, or the chair he was sitting in would be perfect for a catnap.

"Imagine! Running down the Master of Collinwood!" Quentin turned his attention to Alex who was sitting in the chair adjacent to his. His craggy, good-natured face beamed at his friend. Alex was decidedly informal in his manner and appearance, in stark contrast to just about everything else at Collinwood.

"On his first day too, before he's even put out the rules of the manor," Quentin joked. Quentin's attention was diverted to a piece of art on the wall. It depicted an eye amidst various rays and blotches of color. "I see you've still got that crazy eye of mine."

"That's right, buddy. Whereever we go, that goes!" Alex flicked a stray lock of his wavy and slightly unkempt hair out of his eyes. "So how's life in the old castle? Have you seen Miss Drake smile yet?"

Claire entered the room. Her attire was more stylish than her husband's, and her golden hair never lacked for attention. She was petite but exuded a confidence that dared others to take her lightly. Her pert nature was emblazoned on her features. Her eyes usually twinkled mischievously but also hinted at a deep well of warmth and empathy. Her lips widened into a sardonic and slightly reproving grin. "She had no reason to smile at you, Alex. The first time he meets her, he asks her if the place is haunted." She winced at the memory of that awkward moment. They'd been warned that the locals were adamant in their refusal to discuss the recent tragedies at Collinwood with outsiders. Quentin had passed along the admonition his lawyers had given him. Alex had chosen to disregard it.

Quentin asked, "Is it?"

Claire focused intently on Quentin for a long moment. The question seemed a tad more serious than she'd expected. "Not according to her."

Alex laughed, "We'll have to go to the Blue Whale some night. There's a Captain Russell that will tell you a different story. It seems there's a beautiful young servant girl who roams the halls of Collinwood."

Quentin's expression lightened, "If she cleans well, we'll hire her."

"Time for lunch. What do you want, ham or tuna fish?"

"Both", Alex answered.

Claire frowned slightly, concerned about the slow but sure expansion of her husband's waistline, but she decided not to make an issue of it when Quentin answered, "The same." She exited with a laugh and a reproofing glance at her husband.

"So my rich landlord who doesn't charge rent, how do you like the estate?"

Quentin, wanting to avoid the topic for now, changed the subject. "When did you and Claire get here?"

"About two weeks ago. I thought you two would never get here." When Quentin did not reply, a look of concern crossed Alex's face. "Hey, what's the matter? Is something wrong?" When Quentin shook his head in denial, Alex continued, "Bloodshot eyes, unsuitable pallor."

Quentin laughed and played along with the joke, "Well doc, I didn't sleep well last night. Funny thing about this place ... I keep imagining things."

"What do you mean, imagining things?"

"Oh, it's nothing, forget it."

"No, man." Alex forced a light look and smile, "Maybe I can use it. You know we're starting a new Gothic novel."

Quentin gave his friend a look that signaled the subject was closed, at least for now. "That reminds me: I have a library that's got to be full of material. Be my guest." Alex nodded his thanks and accepted Quentin's decision, for the moment at least.

After lunch, Quentin excused himself saying, "I need to stop procrastinating and get to work!" He returned to the main house and changed into some old clothes and gathered up his easel and paint kit. "Carlotta, I want to start work today. Can you suggest a good room?"

She nodded, "I think I know just the place," and motioned for him to follow her through several twisting corridors. "I'm sure you'll find it perfect." Quentin knew almost at once that she was leading him to the tower room. They made their way up the long, narrow staircase. Carlotta fumbled with the keys.

"Wait." Carlotta turned to regard him with a curious expression. "I have the strangest feeling I've been here before."

"How could you have been?"

"I couldn't have."

She turned her attention back to the lock and opened the door. When she entered, she moved to the side, affording Quentin an unobstructed view of the room. She'd told him it had been used for storage, so he'd expected musty boxes of old clothes, worn furniture, and perhaps, just perhaps, a treasure or two, well hidden among the bric-a-brac. What he saw evoked a smile of wonder and amazement. A myriad of paintings and sculptures decorated the circular room. "Well, does it still seem so familiar?"

"No," the lie troubled him. He did not feel at all guilty being untruthful to Carlotta. What concerned him was the fact that he felt the need for deception. In fact, he couldn't shake the *déjà vu* he'd felt ever since arriving in this house. He'd always had problems with directions, and yet he was easily navigating his own way through the maze of rooms and halls. His sudden expert handling of the horse also puzzled him. As out of practice as he was, he should have been thrown soon after mounting the animal. Instead, he'd handled him like a pro.

"I wouldn't worry about it, Mr. Collins. There is always a logical explanation for feelings like this. Will the room do?"

"Yes ... Yes ... it's fine. It's been used as a studio before?"

"Not in my time. If you need anything else, I'll be downstairs." As she turned to leave, a triumphant smile lit up her face. She turned for a moment and fixed her steely gaze on Quentin as he set up his easel and prepared to go to work. Wary of attracting his attention, she abruptly turned on her heel and left him to his work.

Quentin was ecstatic. The light was perfect, the ambiance was perfect, the view was, well, perfect. He had a mental image of a piece he'd been intending to create. It was a sequel of sorts to the "Crazy Eye" painting he'd given Alex. His short handtitle for the piece was "Who's Watching the Watcher?". A myriad of eyes would be seen observing the oblivious pair of orbs that had been the subject of the first work. On impulse, he dismissed the whole project. Here in the tower, it seemed to be juvenile and cliché. The tower afforded him an excellent view of the forest and the ocean beyond. Although he'd always considered landscapes to be boring subjects, he had the urge to bring this vista to life on canvas. And when he finished? Maybe he'd break another of Quentin Collins' taboos and paint a portrait of his lovely wife. He worked at a feverish pace for hours, beginning to create an accurate representation of the view from his window. On some level, he marveled at how the style and tone of his work had changed, but he did not let these questions and concerns interfere with what was important - the work.

The day passed in a blur of colors and strokes. When he emerged from the tower, dusk had settled over the great estate. He shook his head in amazement. He'd worked through the entire day and had been oblivious to the passage of time. He'd even labored through lunch, something he'd never done before. Famished, he made his way to the pantry for dinner and decided to call it an early night.

Quentin, clad in pajamas, climbed into bed and cuddled up with Tracy. "I can't tell you how happy I am with the tower room. It's absolutely perfect."

"I know it. We're going to have a long and happy life here." She turned her head to kiss him again. "Good night, darling." She turned to her side and closed her eyes. It was only a minute or two before Quentin heard the regular, rhythmic pattern of her breathing, indicating she was already asleep. Quentin, feeling totally at peace, followed her moments later.

Hours later, he abruptly opened his eyes. The glow from the tower beckoned to him, and arose to answer the summons.

### Chapter 3

"Leave me alone", Quentin mumbled.

"Quentin, it's 10:30!"

"I didn't sleep too well."

She kissed him lightly on the lips. "Now get up." Her tone was soft and sweet, but there was an underlying firmness that would brook no disobedience. He sighed and forced himself out of bed. As he dressed, he tried to remember what he'd dreamt about the night before. Had he been dreaming? Or had he been roaming the halls all night as Tracy had attested yesterday. He noticed the soles of his feet were brown, as if he'd been walking barefoot. He'd showered last night. Surely they'd not gotten that dirty between the bathroom and the bedroom.

His head ached and he decided to worry about that another time. "Right now," he told himself, "I need coffee. Black and lots of it."

Carlotta met him in the kitchen and handed him a steaming mug. "Mrs. Collins asked me to prepare a picnic lunch for you. It will be ready at noon, but I can hold it for you until later, if you want to have breakfast now."

"No, no thank you. I'll skip breakfast for today. Might as well move right on to lunch. Is the paper here?"

"Yes, on the table."

"Thank you." He started perusing the headlines when Tracy came in. "I understand we're going on a picnic."

"Yes", she frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh nothing really," she paused and almost let the subject drop. Quentin was about to return his attention to the news when she decided to continue. "I was planning to make my legendary egg salad

sandwiches for lunch, but Carlotta wouldn't hear of it! She kept insisting that it was her job to do things like that. Then she all but physically shooed me out of the kitchen. I felt like an intruder."

"Oh, I'm sure that's just her way. What are we having?"

"Pate' sandwiches."

"That's nice."

"No, it's not. Do you know what pate' is made from?" Quentin shook his head. "Liver, that's what. I hate liver." Quentin thought her screwed up face was adorable.

"Did you tell her that?"

"Yes, I did. She just smiled and said, 'We'll see if we can't find something else for you, something less rich'."

"Well, that was nice of her."

"Maybe, but her manner, Quentin, it seemed so haughty, so condescending."

"I think that's just her way."

"Maybe it is, but I don't like it. I'll let you finish your paper. Meet me out front at noon, OK?"

He nodded and returned to his newspaper. He was reading more out of habit than actual interest. The outside world seemed so far removed from Collinwood, so irrelevant to his life here. It was odd to him. He'd always been in a foul mood if his paper was not there, ready for his perusal the moment he sat down to breakfast. A tardy Times meant the office received an angry call.

A tinkling piano melody called out to him. Curious, he rose and followed the sound to the drawing room. He focused his attention on the piano. No one was there, and the cover was down. He heard the music again from behind him. He whirled and discovered that the piano was now on the opposite side of the room. A lovely flaxen-haired woman with fascinating moonlike eyes was addressing him. "When I'm not with you, this is my way of feeling you are near. I sit alone; I play this song; I see your smile." She was dressed in a long gown that belonged to a bygone age. It suddenly occurred to him that the year that gown was worn was 1810. How he knew was a mystery. He was certainly no expert on 19<sup>th</sup> Century fashions, but he was sure it was correct.

Dimly, he was aware that he was more than a viewer of this tableau. It was as if he were sharing his body with someone else. He leaned forward and kissed the lovely lady of mystery, holding her close. On one level, he was fully engaged in the kiss, but part of him struggled to remember who she was. Of course! He remembered the portrait of Angelique. He also became aware that they were being watched by the laughing woman from the funeral. Suddenly, he knew her name. It was Laura, and she was not laughing now. Although she was also blonde, he noticed that her hair seemed drab and mousy when compared to Angelique's. Her eyes blazed with barely controlled rage, and her anger accentuated the age lines on her face. Distantly, he heard himself ask, "Did you enjoy watching us, dear wife?"

Angelique's laughter was like the jingling of little bells, but there was no innocence or humor in it. She cast a derisive glance at the older woman, "She must have. She didn't leave."

"How incredible you are, the two of you, what you do in this house ..."

"In front of the family," Quentin heard himself add, mocking her outraged, petulant tone.

Angelique joined in the game and more accurately mimicked the angry woman's manner and speech patterns. "Who knows who sees us? Think of the servants!"

"You are a witch! Charles, can't you see? Are you so mesmerized that you don't even know what's happening to you?"

"Oh, he knows what's happening, Laura, my darling, and for the first time he's really enjoying it."

"There you are!" Tracy's exclamation jerked him back to the present. He stood there numb while she waited for his response. "Darling, are you all right?"

"Yes, of course. Why wouldn't I be? I was just waiting for you."

She gave him a long hard stare, not totally convinced that there was no cause for concern. After a long moment, she said, "I'm ready. Come on. It's a beautiful day." He smiled and followed her outside.

Gerard saddled up a couple of mounts for them, and they rode aimlessly for a bit, finally stopping outside the greenhouse. They ate lunch, chatting amiably, just enjoying the beauty of the day and each

other. After lunch, Quentin worked on some sketches while Tracy looked on with interest at first, but then became increasingly restless.

She eyed the greenhouse. It was huge; the ceiling would tower many yards over the head of any occupant. Many of the panels were empty, the glass having fallen and shattered over the years. It had obviously not been used or even maintained for ages. "I don't care if it is dangerous. I want to look inside," Tracy insisted.

Quentin eyed the dilapidated structure with some concern. Some of the panels looked as if they might drop out at any second. Still, there was almost no wind, and they'd not heard the sound of any glass shattering in the hour or so they'd been sitting near it. Besides, Tracy had that look, the one that said, "I'm doing this whether you come with me or not." Quentin nodded in acquiescence, took her hand and led her inside. Quentin turned on the camera in his mind. At least that's what he called his ability to view a scene for a few seconds and recapture the image later on a sketch pad. "Who knows," he thought. "I might get a masterpiece out of this."

Tracy was more than a bit disappointed. There really wasn't much to see. The roof had lost the majority of its glass panels, and there were treacherously keen shards everywhere. She doubted that any of them could penetrate her boot, but she did not want to test the theory. Apart from the broken glass, there was little else, just rotting wood and a few overturned pots.

Quentin, on the other hand, was finding it fascinating. The odd remaining panes had become warped with time and distorted the images he viewed in them. He took a mental snapshot of a tree that now appeared to be bent at incredibly impossible angles. "That will make a nice piece," he stated, his voice almost a whisper.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something, for just an instant, reflected onto one of the panels to his right. By the time he swiveled his head, it was gone. For just an instant, he thought he'd seen a woman in clothes from the early 1800s. He scanned the area around them and blinked. It had to be a trick of the light. There was no one else besides them. Tracy touched his shoulder, "Are you ready to go?"

He nodded and joked, "I'm getting bored. Shall we have drinks on the veranda?"

Tracy laughingly exclaimed, "Oh, I can't stand it! What a way to live!" They made their way, hand in hand, out of the desiccated hulk, packed up the remains of their lunch and continued their ride. They spent the rest of the day enjoying the idyllic splendor of the estate. The day's activity climaxed when they came to a railroad footbridge that spanned a calm, glassy river. They sat there watching the impending setting of the sun. Wordlessly, they consumed the leftovers from lunch and watched as the descending orb spilled its magnificent colors across the horizon. When the luminescent globe disappeared, they allowed the horses to lead them back to Collinwood.

They were tired but ecstatic and decided to call it an early night. Although they both fell asleep almost instantly, Quentin was again awakened a few hours later by the insistent summons of the light in the tower.

#### Chapter 4

The direct sunlight assaulted him. After a long struggle to ignore the offending light and heat, he surrendered. As he arose, he considered drawing the drapes, but by the time he got to the window and realized how late it was, he decided to get dressed and face the day. Despite all the inspiration he'd felt in his new home, he had gotten precious little actually done. The tower was littered with sketches and ideas but no firm starts.

Once dressed, he made his way downstairs and was mildly surprised to find that Tracy was not in any of her usual haunts. He heard faint voices making their way through the open window. When he exited the house, he saw Tracy and Claire. Claire had pulled her car up to the entrance. "Good morning, sleepyhead," Tracy admonished him as she opened the car door.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"We're going to town," Claire informed him. "It's about time I showed her the shops."

Tracy smiled, "Want to come?"

"No, I can't. I've got to start doing some work. Do you realize we've been here for a week now?"

"Can I help it if you sleep away the day? OK. Do good work; I'll see you later." He leaned and kissed her through the open window. A moment later, they drove off.

Quentin decided to walk around the perimeter of the house and enter through the back. It wasn't exactly a shortcut to the tower, but it was more scenic. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something dangling from a massive tree, the same one so prominently visible from the gallery. For a split second, he saw, or thought he saw, the hanging woman he'd spied on his first day at Collinwood. A moment later, a child about 10 years old, clutching a baby doll and screaming was visible from the window of one of the second story rooms in the mansion. She looked directly at the form dangling from the tree. When Quentin looked back, he expected the figure to be gone, but it was still there, swinging back and forth like a pendulum. When he glanced over his shoulder up at the window, the little girl was gone, and the phantom of the suspended body had vanished as well.

Quentin dashed in the house, expertly navigating the maze of corridors to the room he'd seen from the outside. Toys were neatly arranged around the colorful room. Carlotta was standing near a child's four-poster bed, arranging the stuffed animals that reclined on the pillow. Mild curiosity was etched on her features as she witnessed him dash to the window, peering out. "I was outside."

"I know. I saw you from the window."

Quentin regarded her suspiciously, "But I didn't see you. I saw a little girl, holding a doll." He ignored Carlotta's bewildered expression. "This was a child's room." It was not a question.

"Yes, it was Mrs. Stoddard's when she was a little girl." Her smile was full of warmth and reassurance. "It must have been a trick of the light," she asserted reasonably.

"Yes, it must have been," Quentin conceded, not quite convinced. "Well, I'd better get back to work." He turned and headed toward the tower.

Claire guided the car down the narrow, winding, one-way streets, praying for a parking space, "So everything is perfect?"

"Yes," Tracy answered in a tentative tone.

"It isn't perfect?" She offered a prayer of thanks and turned into a spot that was not terribly far from their destination.

Tracy paused for a bit, considering her answer. She closed her door, "Well, it is, but I'm a little concerned about Quentin. I don't think he's getting a lot of work done."

"What's he doing?" As they walked, they glanced halfheartedly at the various shops. Some offered the latest fashions, others, antiques, and the rest were an assorted mix of just about everything. She made a mental note to come back to some of them later.

"It's not that he doesn't try. He goes to the tower every day, but not much really happens."

"Is he worried about it?"

"No, I don't think so. But sometimes he seems so far away. It's hard to know what he's thinking."

"You know that's what I felt when I first met him in Paris. He was so super moody. He and Alex always connected, but I spent the first month just trying to figure him out. Those eyes always seem to see so much, and then everything becomes a kind of private thing. But that's what's so great about him. Don't you like a dark, brooding man of mystery?"

"Yes," both women tried in vain to maintain a serious composure and failed miserably, collapsing into laughter. It subsided as they entered the boutique Claire had wanted to show Tracy. The wares on display were a mixture of the latest conservative fashions, more mod styles, and some vintage clothing. A foppishly, flamboyantly dressed man greeted them with an easy smile. His light brown, curly locks were reflected in the sunlight that streamed through the open window. He had sensitive features that were not quite feminine. It was impossible to tell if his quick smile was genuine or manufactured in the hopes of making a big sale.

"Hi, Gregory, I'm back."

"And I have a little mattress-ticking jumper you'll live in for the rest of your life," he exclaimed, pointing at a rack with a delicate forefinger.

Claire smiled indulgently, "Alex won't let me wear those knickers. He said if had wanted to live with an 1890s newsboy he'd have found one."

Gregory held out his hands, admitting defeat, "God knows where. Obviously he has no sense of style, chic. Come to my house next week for a drink and wear them. He'll adore them."

"He'll adore those drinks. This is Tracy Collins."

Gregory bowed graciously, "The lady of the manor? Welcome."

"Hi. This makes me feel like I'm back in New York."

"Oh, do I have something for you! It's madness, it's so perfect." The dress he whipped out was an insane collection of garish colors in a floral pattern that Tracy thought would indeed be perfect for her, if she contemplated moving to a commune. "Could it be more you?"

"It's very me, but it's completely un-Quentin," she stated diplomatically in a tone that indicated the subject was closed.

"The husband, darling?"

Claire had been wandering about the shop aimlessly while her friend and Mr. Gregory chatted. She spied an English riding outfit on a mannequin. "That's Quentin!"

"Oh, he'd never wear that," Tracy protested.

"I'm sure he'd look marvelous in it," Gregory asserted.

"Gregory, wrap it up. We'll take it," Claire ordered.

Tracy started laughing at both the thought of Quentin wearing it and Claire's opinion that it was perfect for him. She decided to acquiesce to her friends' suggestion. She wanted to see the expression on Quentin's face when he saw it. "All right, but only if we can return it."

Quentin snorted in frustration. The texture wasn't right; the composition wasn't right, nothing about the damned thing was right. He thought he might do better if he repositioned his easel and changed position. Perhaps a slight change in the lighting would help. He moved a trunk, planning to plant the easel in its spot. The movement revealed a hidden cupboard that had probably not seen the light of day in years, if not decades. He opened the panel and found several canvases. They had two things in common. They were all portraits of Angelique and were all inscribed Charles Collins. The most interesting was an unfinished work in which Angelique reclined seductively on a bed of roses. She was gazing at something. Exactly what would always remain a mystery. That portion of the piece was unfinished. The inscription read, "Charles Collins, 1810."

Suddenly, the painting retreated from his sight. He was on the daybed with Angelique, clothed as she was in the picture, in a thin, almost translucent gown that left little to the imagination. He held her close, eyes closed, reveling in the scent of her lilac perfume. He pulled her in for a passionate embrace. Eventually, she pulled away and fixed her almost hypnotic gaze on him. "You must finish the picture," she ordered.

"Why?"

"You must finish it because when you do, you will give me the greatest gift of all. I know you merely planned it to torture her, but that's not enough. My darling, you must bring the painting to life, Charles." He nodded as she continued, "We are in each other's souls, Charles. We can't escape it." Their next kiss was interrupted by a pounding on the door. Angelique's gaze set fire to his soul, "Bring the painting to life, Charles, promise me!"

The banging continued, "Charles, I want to talk to my wife." Charles and Angelique continued to gaze into each other's eyes, hoping he would go away, as he had on other occasions. "I know you're in there! Now open the door!"

Charles arose with a sigh and limped to the door, speaking through it, "More of your dreary moralizing? You try my patience, brother."

"For the last time, open the door!"

Resigned, Angelique said, "Let him in."

Charles pushed the door open a crack revealing a weakly handsome man with blond, curly locks. On some level, the part of him that was Quentin recognized him as the man who was with Laura at the funeral. "I've come for my wife, Charles."

"Well, brother, you've suddenly become a man." Charles turned to Angelique, "Will you take the credit for that my dear?"

Her tinkling laugh provoked a look of rage and fury on her husband's face. Taking advantage of Charles' momentary distraction, he savagely pushed at the door, knocking Charles backward, nearly off his feet. Charles compensated and remained standing as the reverend and four other men pushed their way in. Angelique arose, her expression registering alarm. Charles positioned himself between her and the attacking men. Two of them maneuvered themselves behind him and pinned his arms back. "Leave her alone, Strack! I'm warning you! Gabriel, have you lost your mind?" Gabriel stared blankly back at him; his rage now diffused, he appeared indecisive. Charles turned his attention to the men who were holding him, "Tom ... Ward ..." They avoided eye contact and said nothing.

Strack was advancing on Angelique who was crouching backward in an attitude that was similar to that of a feline anticipating an attack. Strack paused for a moment, considering the blazing fury in her eyes. He motioned to the other two men, "Take her!" Charles struggled as they rush forward obediently. Angelique lashed out with a graceful catlike swipe and viciously clawed the face of the larger of the two men. Both recoiled, momentarily intimidated.

Angelique's voice was resigned but full of menace, "Don't any of you touch me. I'll come with you, but don't any of you touch me!" She spat out the last two words.

Strack blinked; annoyed that he'd briefly lost the upper hand. Summoning an authoritative tone, he ordered, "Come with us, Angelique Collins!"

Abruptly, Quentin's perspective returned to the present. Dusk had settled in and he stood alone in the semidarkness. "Gabriel ... Angelique ... that was her funeral I saw. What happened here? What?" The tower room offered no further answers so he packed up his kit, grabbed the unfinished portrait, and headed downstairs.

He was greeted by Tracy who regarded him with a reproachful look. "Did you forget that Claire and Alex are having dinner with us?"

"No, I just lost track of time."

She eyed him intently for a few seconds before admonishing, "Well, they're here." With that, she turned toward the gallery with Quentin in tow.

Claire and Alex greeted him warmly. "What's that?" Alex asked, pointing to the unfinished painting.

"Oh, I found some paintings in the tower. They were painted by an ancestor of mine, one Charles Collins. This one's unfinished." He handed it to Alex and wandered over to the Angelique's portrait. It seemed to Quentin as if she towered over them all, silently watching. He wondered if she'd approve of Collinwood's new master and mistress.

"He looks sort of like Quentin," Claire pointed out.

"Sort of? More like a dead ringer, except for that scar on his cheek," Alex countered.

Tracy nodded her agreement, "Must be a family resemblance. He is Quentin's ancestor."

"Still kind of uncanny," Alex answered. "Too bad it's not finished. It's an enchanting piece, almost demands your attention."

"It looks like he was going to add some other people," Quentin speculated, dividing his attention between the conversation in progress and his fascination with the image of Angelique.

Alex shook his head. "I wonder why he never finished it. Yeah, it's amazing isn't it? So evil here," pointing to the piece in his hand. He gestured to the portrait on the wall, "So prim over there. The double life of Angelique Collins. I wonder what Charles Collins knew that the others didn't,"

Claire rolled her eyes, "Here he goes. Another plot for another book."

"I've been doing some research," Alex exclaimed in a defensive tone.

Quentin raised his eyebrows, "What did you find out?"

"The servant girl legend is just that, and after seeing this, my vote goes to her. She'd make some ghost."

Claire's face took on a mock expression of sympathy, "Poor Angelique Collins. He's going to start, and she'll have no more secrets."

Tracy broke her silence, "Do we have to have a ghost, Alex?" Alex glanced at her, not able to discern if she was being serious. She glanced at him a moment longer then looked away. Alex was silent, unsure of how he should respond.

Quentin broke the awkward silence. "Alex always makes up his own legends. Anyway, I'm not half as curious about Angelique Collins as I am about Charles. He is quite good, you know." Quentin gently but firmly relieved Alex of the painting.

"He is good?"

"He was good," Quentin amended.

"He was good," Alex agreed, reluctantly. There was something about the painting he didn't like. Charles had an unpleasant expression on his face. He appeared triumphant, as if he'd just completed a long, arduous task. But there was something disquieting about his demeanor; it suggested something sinister to Alex. He tried to shrug it off. Maybe it's just the resemblance to Quentin, he reasoned. Still, he did not like the painting and wished Quentin would burn it. Carlotta came in the room and announced that dinner was ready.

They made their way to the dining room where they found a sumptuous feast awaiting them. Alex did not care for Carlotta much; her whole attitude and demeanor rubbed him the wrong way. However, you had to admit, the lady could cook. He wondered, not for the first time, how she managed to keep the house up. From all evidence, it was a solo effort. There was Gerard, but he seemed to be solely engaged in the outdoor chores. He savored a bite of impeccably flavored pork.

The foursome chatted amiably over the main course. As Carlotta cleared the plates, Alex pointed to Claire's new dress, reopening a previous argument. "Will you look at that? Gregory strikes again! He must think we're the manor folk. Honey, remember, we are broke."

Claire smiled indulgently at him. It was an age-old argument. She swore that if Alex had his way, her whole wardrobe would come from Goodwill. She'd splurged a little since arriving in Collinsport. OK, she admitted, it had been more than a little, but they were not paying rent and she had to have something to wear at book signings and promotional engagements. She fervently hoped they could make lightning strike twice with the next book. Their first had been a best-seller, but the proceeds had been barely enough to cover their prior debts and medical expenses incurred by Alex's ailing mother,

Tracy had quickened her pace and greeted them in the dining room, standing next to Carlotta who was holding a package. "What's that?" Quentin queried with a slightly suspicious tone.

Carlotta handed him the package as Tracy answered, "It's our surprise."

"What is it?"

She beamed, "Something you can't be without?"

"You've got to be kidding!" Quentin tore open the wrapping and drew out the riding habit, an expression of disbelief transforming his face. Laughter erupted from the trio, and Quentin joined in almost immediately.

Tracy controlled herself long enough to announce, "Gregory said I can return it." Quentin kissed her lightly on the lips.

"I promise you I'll wear it ... someday." Carlotta had been standing there immune to the atmosphere of mirth that had enveloped the two couples. As she turned to leave, Quentin called out, "Oh Carlotta, I found some paintings of Charles Collins in the tower room. Do you know anything about his history?"

She turned to face them, a look of composed joy etched in her features. "He was a brilliant man, a marvelous artist."

Alex, puzzled by her change in demeanor and her adamant tone commented, "You almost sound like you knew him."

She regarded him impassively, "I've read a lot about him, Mr. Jenkins." Turning her attention to Quentin she asked, "Will you be having brandy in the gallery?"

Quentin regarded Alex with a questioning glance. "No, we're up with the sun these days."

Quentin shook his head, and she returned to the task of clearing away the remnants of the meal. Claire was sending signals that it was time to go. Quentin and Alex followed their wives out of the dining

room and down the hall. Quentin lagged behind, letting the women move ahead of them. He turned to Alex, his voice lowered, "Listen, I've had more of those crazy daydreams."

"Want to talk about them?"

Quentin scanned the area in front of them, satisfied that Tracy could not hear them. "Not now. Why don't you come over tomorrow?" Alex nodded and turned to join his wife as they made their way back to the cottage.

Quentin was tired and decided to turn in early. As he'd hoped, he was asleep almost instantly. At first, his slumber was normal and restful; however, when the insistent beacon in the tower room shone out, casting its rays upon him, he became restless, tossing and turning. A few minutes later, he opened his eyes, gazing intently at the amber glow. After a few seconds, he answered the summons and made his way out of the room, down the winding corridors, and up the steep steps to the tower room.

The door opened of its own accord. Angelique was there, reclining in state, radiating an opalescent glow. The milky light made her seem to be almost transparent, without substance. She extended her arms, smiling lasciviously, beckoning him to join her on the daybed. He advanced eagerly, burying his face in her golden tresses, exulting in the scent of lilac perfume. She pulled him in close and kissed him passionately, ardently.

Quentin wasn't the only one to witness the eerie, ghostly luminescence. Gerard had seethed with rage as night after night it had summoned Quentin to the tower, to HER. He'd grudgingly obeyed the orders from Carlotta and HER to stay away. Before the usurper arrived, she had been his, or rather he had been hers. The days were filled with tedious, endless chores. He fetched, carried, and performed whatever service Carlotta demanded of him. He did so with little complaint; always mindful that at the end of the day, SHE would be there, waiting with outstretched arms. He tried, as he had on other nights, to ignore HER betrayal. A delicate peal of laughter, so faint, almost inaudible taunted him. Stifling a roar of rage, his grip tightened on the truncheon he carried. It was the same one with which he'd dispatched the intruder who'd invaded the mansion the night before HE arrived.

With serpentine stealth, he made his way to the tower, creeping silently, purposefully, up the stairs. His expert tread avoided all the weak points that would creak and give away his intent. He paused as he neared the threshold. SHE would be furious. In her rage, she might even decide he was now expendable and discard him like a worn out pair of shoes. Another tinkle of laughter assaulted his ears, dissolving his indecision. With a roar of rage, he launched himself on Quentin, pulling him off her.

Charles' ecstasy was rudely aborted as he was thrown to the floor. He saw Gabriel standing over him wielding a vicious looking club. It descended in a deadly arc; he twisted away, barely avoiding the deadly impact. The attempt to launch another ruthless blow was thwarted by Angelique. Her talons tore at Gabriel's face. He screamed and dropped the weapon, covering his face with his hands to protect his eyes from the savage assault. Charles took advantage of the distraction and leaped upon him, raining blow after blow upon his disoriented foe. He screamed, "She's mine brother! She's mine!"

Gerard managed to shove Quentin off him and unsteadily get to his feet. Quentin, seeing Gabriel through a scarlet haze of rage, brutally pounced on him, throwing his "brother" backward down the stairs. Quentin darted after him, beating his stunned opponent with more blows and then encircling his hands around his throat, determined to choke the life out of him. Dazed and almost unconscious, Gerard could offer little resistance.

His murderous efforts were interrupted by someone shaking him, "Quentin, stop it. You'll kill him! Stop it!" With a bellow of rage, he turned and fixed his attention on Laura. Silently, he swore that this would be her last act of interference. His hands locked around her neck, relentlessly determined to end her life. Dimly he noticed her hair was dark; her eyes were brown. They pleaded silently for mercy. Laura? No ... He released her and whispered her name, "Tracy." His arms dropped to his side as he watched her gasp and sputter, her fingers massaging her chafed throat. He looked down at the floor where the semiconscious Gerard lay, the lacerations bleeding profusely. He turned his attention back to Tracy, a silent apology stuck in his throat.

“Mr. Collins!” He whirled; it was Carlotta, clad in a nightgown, her face transfixed with horror. She ran to her prone nephew. “What happened?” Quentin stared vacantly into space, unable to answer her query.

He stood there, motionless and unresponsive, a look of horror etched on his face. Tracy took his hand tentatively. It hung limp at his side, his features unchanging. “Quentin, come with me,” she suggested timidly. When he didn’t answer or give the slightest sign that her presence registered in his mind, she cleared her throat and repeated the request more assertively, “Quentin, darling, come with me.” Relief washed over her as he turned, nodded and smiled faintly at her. She led him into a room that had been used for card playing in the past. She chose this particular place because it was not as elegantly furnished and was the closest thing to cozy and intimate that Collinwood had to offer. “Carlotta, please bring tea to the card room, something soothing to help him sleep.” Carlotta nodded and disappeared into the kitchen. Gerard glared up at them as they left the room.

Tracy ushered him to a chair. Quentin began to babble almost incoherent apologies and aborted attempts at an explanation. Tracy tried to reassure him, hoping the tea would settle his nerves. They were interrupted by Carlotta. “Gerard should be fine,” she announced reproachfully. “He’s a bit upset about his face, and he has a large bump on his head, but I doubt he’ll need medical attention.”

Tracy favored her with an apologetic expression, “What was he doing in the house anyway? He sleeps in the groundskeeper’s cottage, doesn’t he?”

Carlotta nodded, “Yes, Mrs. Collins. He thought he saw a light and came to investigate.”

“A light? From where?”

“The tower.”

“Well, you can pass along our apologies, but please tell him that Quentin sometimes works late and is occasionally in the tower.” Carlotta nodded her understanding and set the tray down on the table. “It’s late; please go back to bed.” Carlotta cast a long look at both of them before she turned and left the room.

Quentin sat for many long minutes, head in his hands, his tea untouched. “There isn’t any explanation, none at all.”

“Darling, I don’t think we need to talk about it anymore.” She stifled a yawn, and took a sip from her cup, hoping that Quentin would do the same.

“The first thing I remember was Gerard, but I didn’t recognize him. What was he doing in the house anyway?”

“He simply thought he saw a light.”

“And what was I about to do to you?”

“You stopped when you realized what you were doing.”

“But still...”

She interrupted him by crossing over and caressing his shoulders, “Don’t worry about me. The important thing is to try to find out why it happened.”

“I know; how are we going to do that?”

“It’s late. I’m sure it will seem easier tomorrow.”

“You’re not afraid to sleep in the same room with me?”

She held him close, “No, darling, no.”

She took him by the hand and led him back to their room. She was reassured to hear, judging from his regular breathing, that he’d dropped off into sleep almost immediately. With a deep sigh of relief she turned over and followed him.

Quentin’s slumber was anything but restful. Gabriel’s voice assaulted him again. “Wake up, Charles, wake up!” He gazed up, bleary eyed and sleepy, “You’ve been with her again!”

“What’s wrong with you, brother? Don’t you remember? Your wife is dead.”

He shook his head in an accusatory fashion, “No, she still comes to you. I know it.” Charles heard himself laughing at Gabriel and immediately regretted it. A mad gleam had come into his “brother’s” eyes. “All right, if you want her so much, you will have her!” Two men burst into the room and accosted him. He fought in vain, but they relentlessly dragged him from the room. One of them hit

him over the head to force him to cease his struggling. He was vaguely aware of being dragged down stairs in near total darkness. Gabriel stood at the threshold of an impregnable iron door. He nodded to the thugs, and they threw him into the dank, fetid chamber. "You want her? You will have her! For eternity, brother, for eternity!" Gabriel giggled insanely watching his brother scramble to his feet an instant before the door was slammed in his face.

"Let me out! Let me out!" Despite the grogginess from the blow to the head, he managed to rise unsteadily on his feet. Dimly, he heard an odd scraping noise. He staggered in the darkness toward the sound and fell over something large and rectangular blocking his path. He cursed and felt the smooth wooden surface. It was a box of some kind. Feeling his way around the length of it, he staggered towards the scraping noise. Eventually, he made his way to the door and pounded in vain, alternately screaming to be let out. The scratching sound continued as he collapsed in a dejected heap. Eventually, the air became stale, and he found it difficult to breathe. His breaths turned to gasps as he struggled to inflate his lungs with oxygen-filled air. "I can't breathe. I can't breathe."

Dimly, Quentin was aware that he was being shaken by Tracy as the choking sensation overcame him. "Quentin, Quentin, what's wrong?" He continued to sputter and gasp for a few more seconds, but they soon trailed off as he became peripherally aware of where he was and of Tracy's presence. A look of relief passed over his face before he trailed off into normal sleep.

## Chapter 5

Tracy sat, savoring her coffee, as she mulled over the events of the last night. She'd discovered that Collingsport didn't have a psychiatrist, and she doubted she could convince Quentin to see one even if they did. It was too giant a leap. No, she just might convince him to go to a regular doctor, then if he recommended a psychiatrist ... Well, one step at a time. It was a long shot at best but her only real hope.

Tracy was quite surprised when Quentin came in from outside. "How early did you get up?" Her eyebrows arched as she became aware of the fact that he was wearing the riding habit. She'd been certain the present would be taken as a joke. While she had to admit he wore the suit well, it was another item in a long list of oddities that concerned her. Quentin had always dressed very casually and shunned occasions that demanded formal attire. At their wedding, he'd worn the tuxedo without complaint but was quite obviously uncomfortable. He'd emitted a great sigh of relief when he'd shed himself of it in their hotel suite. "Oh, you're wearing them," she managed to sound casual about the observation.

"I just came from the stable. I apologized to Gerard."

"Quentin, I think we should see a doctor."

"I don't know. Let me think about it."

"Why think about it? After what happened last night, we don't have a choice. Let me ask Carlotta about a doctor." He was pacing nervously, a sure sign that he believed he was being nagged by her. As she waited for his reply, she noticed he was limping. "What's wrong with your leg?"

"What? Oh ... I took a ride down by the mill, and that stupid horse threw me. It'll be OK; don't worry."

"I asked you not to ride Ulysses," she chided in a concerned tone.

"It wasn't Ulysses; it was Doubloon."

"What about the doctor?"

He was quiet for a very long moment. He approached her, "Do you still love me?"

"I still love you, yes." She gazed into his almost hypnotic eyes and was tempted to let the subject drop. She resisted the urge and continued, "Quentin, maybe it's this house. You know, we don't have to stay."

"Look, in the light of day, this whole thing seems ridiculous. Why don't we at least give it a day, and we'll talk about it this afternoon?" She considered it for a moment and nodded. "And I'll think about that doctor."

Tracy decided a ride was just what she needed as well, so she put on a pair of boots and headed for the stable. She wandered inside, looking for Gerard. A loud snarl made her jump. The two black Dobermans were blocking her path. Sunlight glinted on their wickedly pointed fangs. It took every ounce of self-control she possessed to keep from screaming or running. Carefully avoiding contact, she slowly backed away. They relentlessly followed, saliva occasionally hitting her as they continued their vicious growling and barking.

Gerard had been on the roof making repairs when he saw Tracy enter the stables. Grinning with amusement, he climbed down the scaffold and sauntered toward the dogs. They had backed her into a corner. He snickered quietly as he heard her weakly plead, "Stay away ... Stay away."

"Don't move," he ordered her. The scratches on his face still ached intensely. He was enjoying her discomfiture and would have liked nothing better than to give them leave to tear her to pieces. Instead, he spoke to them calmly, "Now Brutus, now Tar, she won't hurt you, no, she just came down to ride; that's all. She likes Gerard." He reached out to her with a grimy, sweaty hand and pawed her face, smirking lasciviously. She attempted to pull away, but he continued to caress her cheek, leaving a damp, dirty trail behind. "She's a friend, a friend, see?" The aggressive behavior ceased abruptly, and the dogs reluctantly turned to leave.

"Don't ever touch me again," she commanded, her tone seething with rage. Gerard regarded her with a cool, sullen grin. Tracy considered complaining to Quentin, but she reasoned that Gerard would simply claim that he'd not intended to take liberties. He'd touched her in that familiar fashion to communicate her friendliness to the dogs.

"I'll saddle your horse," he informed her without turning to face her.

As he threw a saddle over one of the mounts, she asked, "This isn't Doubloon is it? The horse my husband rode this morning ..."

"We don't have a Doubloon," Gerard interrupted. "He rode Ulysses like he always does."

Tracy was stunned and hurt that Quentin had lied to her. Her face reddened as she asked, "Where's the mill?"

"What?"

"The mill, is it on the property?"

"Oh yeah, the mill. It's over by that ravine, down by the river road." Tracy nodded her thanks and mounted her horse. "I wouldn't bother going over there if I were you." His tone suggested that he was privy to some private joke at her expense.

Tracy turned her head, perturbed, "Why not?"

"You won't see very much," he informed her in a taunting tone. "It burned down over 100 years ago." Tracy shot him a perplexed look. Unsure of what to say in reply, she rode off.

Alex had had a similar idea; a nice ride would be just what he needed. Unlike Tracy, he was riding a bicycle. He'd risen with the sun and tried to write. It had been a dry morning, and he hoped that getting some fresh air and exercise would kick start his creative juices. He'd had an appointment to meet up with Quentin later anyway, so he reasoned, a nice, relaxing jaunt was just what the doctor ordered.

The morning was crisp, and he relished the feel and scent of the early morning air. His eye detected movement, so he stopped. In front of him was the dilapidated greenhouse. The rising sun forced him to squint, but off in the distance, he clearly saw a girl, clad in white traipsing along the path leading to the rotting hulk. She moved airily, the ruffles of her long dress billowing in the breeze. She looked like a refugee of a bygone era. Alex called out, "Hey you!" She disappeared inside. Alex began peddling furiously toward the greenhouse. He dismounted and laid the bike on its side as he called out, "Hello!" He peered in one of the myriad of broken windows but could see no sign of life inside. Determined, he pulled open the rickety door, nearly tearing it off its rusting hinges. He made his way inside, "Is anybody there?" Puzzled, he scanned the area; no one was there. He shook his head, realizing that there was also nowhere for a trespasser to hide.

As he turned to leave, the gentle breeze had accelerated into a gusty wind. A split second later, he heard the sound of wood splintering above him. Several panes of glass began to wobble precariously. He retreated few steps, falling backward, just in time to move out of the path of plummeting shards of

razor sharp glass. The panes exploded a few feet in front of him. Miraculously, he emerged unscathed. His fall had been fortuitous; had he been upright, he would almost certainly have been sprayed with shards from the explosion of glass. As it was, some of them had fallen harmlessly on his prone body. He righted himself hurriedly, shook himself off and began to make his way out of the danger zone.

Tracy had witnessed his close call. She spurred her horse on toward him and dismounted in front of the door. She was about to enter as Alex neared the threshold. "Stay out of here, honey," he warned.

"Alex, are you all right?" He nodded as he exited the building. "What happened?" Tracy asked.

"I was exploring. I guess I shouldn't have been. Then the whole place fell down." Alex bent down to retrieve his bike and walked it over to Tracy's horse. She was uncharacteristically quiet. What's new, Trace?"

Tracy hesitated a moment. "Something very strange happened last night, and I'm worried about it."

"You want to talk about it?" She nodded and proceeded to tell him most of what happened, leaving out the part about his attacking her. Alex listened as his worst fears were confirmed. "Is that all?" Tracy nodded, not trusting herself to vocalize the lie. He stared at her intently, leaving his suspicion of her lie of omission unspoken. "I have an appointment with Quentin. I'll see what he has to say." She nodded again. He hugged her, picked up his bike and rode off.

He met Quentin as he was leaving the house. They walked along the path in the woods while Alex filled him in on his experience at the greenhouse. "You were a fool to ever go in there," Quentin admonished him. He'd already informed Alex about the close call he and Tracy had.

"I told you, I saw someone in a long white dress."

"Your imagination is getting the best of you," Quentin chided.

"I saw Angelique! She tried to kill me."

"God damn it! That's not possible!"

"Quentin, she had a reason to stop me. I found out a lot about your family. You already know about Charles Collins. But do the names Gabriel and Laura mean anything to you?"

Quentin hoped his tone did not sound evasive. "Why should they?"

"Because of those little daydreams of yours."

"Those daydreams don't mean a thing."

"Yesterday you said you wanted to talk about them."

"Now I don't"

"Because of last night?"

"Alex, last night I thought Gerard was a burglar."

"That's all huh? Then why were you screaming 'she's mine brother, she's mine'?" Quentin's gaze bore into Alex. "I think you were living out one of those daydreams. You were Charles, and Gerard was brother Gabriel, and you were fighting over Angelique." He paused, waiting for Quentin to react. When Quentin began to shake his head, Alex pounced, "Quentin, what were you doing in the tower at two in the morning?"

"Working."

"At night?"

"Don't you ever paint at night?"

"Quentin, you're going to laugh at this. I think you're drawn to that room. I think you're being taken over by Angelique."

Quentin regarded him stonily. "You're right. I'm laughing."

"Well, I'm not. Look, the same year Angelique died, Laura drowned, and Charles disappeared. The drowning was recorded as an accident, but supposing Charles killed Laura?"

Quentin regarded him quizzically, "So?"

"Quentin, I think Tracy is in danger."

Finally, Quentin's self-control collapsed, and his temper flared. "Are you trying to tell me I could drown Tracy? I'm not going to listen to any more of this. I am in complete control of myself. Have you mentioned any of this to Tracy?"

“Not yet.”

Quentin took in a deep breath, fighting to regain his composure. “Wait a minute. I’ll make a deal with you. You keep your crazy theories to yourself, and I’ll think about what you said.”

Alex pondered his proposal for a long moment. Finally, he decided on a counter offer, “As long as you stay out of the tower.”

Quentin nodded and clapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s go back to the house.” They made their way back along the path, retracing their steps. Satisfied that an agreement had been reached, they chatted about familiar topics. When they returned to Collinwood, Alex felt a chill wash over him as they meandered into the shadow of the bleak mansion. Quentin turned to him, “I’ll see you later.” Alex smiled wanly at his friend and went to retrieve his bike.

He found Tracy waiting for him. “You’re right,” he told her. “I’m worried about him. He’s changing.”

“But why?”

“That’s what I’m going to try and find out.” The wind whistled through the open windows of the tower. He turned his attention towards it. “Tracy, have you ever been in that room?”

“No, why?”

“Because I think some of our answers are there.”

“How could they be?”

“I don’t know; think you could get in there?”

“He keeps it locked.” She shuddered involuntarily, “I’d rather not try.”

He paused a moment, considering what she said. His mind fought to subdue an image of an angry Quentin tossing her down the stairs for intruding on his domain. He was almost able to dismiss the notion as silly - almost. “OK, forget it.” He bent over to pick up the bike and mounted it. He leaned over to peck her on the cheek. He checked a motion to begin pedaling away and turned to her. “Tracy, I want you to be careful.” Noting her puzzled expression, he continued. “Just be careful. Keep an eye on him, and if anything else happens, call me.” She nodded and turned to re-enter the house. Alex began to pedal away, eager to escape the chill of the ancient mansion. Obeying a sixth sense, he craned his head to peer up at the tower. He saw Carlotta staring intently at them from the stairwell window that was situated just beneath the tower. Unnerved, he turned his attention back to the path and headed toward the cottage.

Tracy also noticed Carlotta peering down from above and was also slightly intimidated and perturbed by her interest in them and wondered why she was interested in their meeting. She tried to tell herself that Carlotta was merely admiring the view but remained unconvinced. The older woman did not appear to be gazing off in the distance; it seemed as if her attention had been riveted on them. Carlotta made her feel uneasy, as if she didn’t belong. She couldn’t put her finger on the exact reason; she’d never been rude or unkind. There was something about the way she looked at her that made her feel as if Carlotta was the mistress of Collinwood, and Tracy was some unwelcome guest that had been invited because it was the right and proper thing to do. She decided to go where she always felt the most relaxed and happy.

Quentin was in the gallery, sitting on one of the overstuffed chairs. She crossed the room to kiss him, “Hi.”

He returned the kiss and smiled, “I want to thank you for not telling Alex everything.” He literally shuddered at the thought of how Alex would have reacted if he’d heard about the attack.

“I couldn’t. You weren’t yourself.”

Carlotta entered with some refreshments and cordial smile. “Carlotta, I’ve decided not to use the tower as a studio anymore.”

Tracy practically squealed her delight, “Quentin!”

Carlotta stiffened; all the warmth in her expression had vanished. “You said you were painting so well there.” Although her tone was neutral, Tracy was certain that Quentin’s decision displeased her. The reason puzzled her. Why should Carlotta care where Quentin painted?

“This room seems better to me. Would you mind moving my easel down tonight?”

“If you’re sure, I’ll start now.” Quentin nodded, and a slight frown creased her face.

The room seemed brighter to Tracy when Carlotta left. She practically ran into Quentin's arms. "Oh, darling, I won't bother you here. I swear I won't. When you were in the tower, I always felt you were so far away."

"Well, I won't be anymore, so I want you to stop worrying. Everything is going to be all right."

Beaming, she answered, "Now I know it will!"

Before turning in, she phoned Alex. He was not reassured by her tone, even though she sounded completely sincere and convinced that all was well.

#### Chapter 6

Tracy was ecstatic when she saw Quentin at his easel, painting, with his morning cup of coffee steaming beside him. She raced to him, planting a good morning kiss on his lips. "Good morning! The world is ours, the gentleman said," he announced gesturing out the window." His enthusiasm was infectious, and Tracy nearly shed a deluge of joyous tears. This was the first time he'd risen before she had since they'd come to Collinwood. Even more encouraging was the level of progress he'd achieved on his latest piece. He'd painted an entire section of canvas that had been blank the night before. She was now more certain than ever that things were back to normal.

"Ours," she agreed wholeheartedly. We'll celebrate. I'll drive into Collinsport and get the biggest steaks anyone has ever bought. We'll charcoal it ourselves." Tracy relished the idea of having a meal without Carlotta hovering over them. She had a knack for dampening her happy moods.

"And eat it ourselves."

"I'll make my famed Caesar salad, which is the only one I can make."

"And we'll open the best wine."

Tracy was distracted by an empty space on the wall. Angelique's portrait had been removed! "What happened to her?"

"Angelique? She's been retired, after years of honorable service," Quentin joked.

"Why?"

"Mostly so Alex will forget about our non-existent ghost." A tolerant smile broke out on his face, "Hey, let me paint."

"Paint on, paint on. I love you." Tracy turned and left the room in search of Carlotta. She felt her anxiety level rise slightly when she heard her voice coming from the kitchen.

"See to it those mutts of yours stay leashed. Now get back to work." Gerard sullenly turned obediently as Tracy entered the room.

"Carlotta, we won't need you tonight."

"Oh?" her tone was challenging. "Are you dining out?"

"No, we're going to have a cook out. I'm getting some steaks and making a Caesar salad."

She favored Tracy with a thin smile; her condescension barely concealed. "Mrs. Collins, there's no need for you to go to the trouble. I have an excellent recipe for a divine marinade. Let me take care of this for you. And as for the Caesar salad," her voice trailed off and she grimaced. "Mrs. Collins, let me whip up a feast for the two of you."

"We want to do it ourselves," she retorted defensively.

"That's what I'm here for."

"You deserve a night off."

"Mrs. Collins, this house is a happier place when everyone knows their place. My station is to serve. Mr. Collins is here to run to supervise."

"And mine? What is my place?"

She gave another of those irritating grins, "Why, a wife is here to make her husband happy. And don't you think Mr. Collins would be happier if he had a meal that was expertly prepared?"

Tracy's temper was barely in control at that point, "Carlotta, take the evening off. I'm going to town to buy some groceries." With that she turned on her heel and stormed out of the kitchen.

Quentin had been painting for some time when Carlotta entered the room with an air of determination. She'd decided that the battle over dinner was one she was not going to contest. There was a more important matter to be dealt with. She hefted the weight of the portrait reverently and strode over

to the gap on the wall. Quentin ceased his work in mid-stroke, and pointed to the picture, "I told you I didn't want to see that again."

"It belongs in this room."

"I find it distracting. I don't want it around."

"There would be fewer distractions if you went back to the tower."

"All right, Carlotta, why is my working in the tower so important to you?

"It isn't; it just seemed so ideal."

Quentin was only barely containing his temper, "That's not the reason. You know about those dreams I've been having, don't you?"

"I don't know what you're referring to."

"You know damned well what I'm referring to." He jabbed a finger at the image of Angelique. "Her! Am I dreaming it, or is she real?" Carlotta was impassive as she studied him, considering what to say next. Revealing too much too soon could be dangerous. If they left now, all could be lost. On the other hand, waiting too long might also be disastrous. It might give his simpering wife more time to poison his mind and convince him to leave. He was already fighting much harder than she'd thought was possible. "Is she real?" He repeated the question in a demanding tone that made the decision for Carlotta.

She gulped as she prepared to play all or nothing hand. "Do you remember that little girl you thought you saw?"

"Yes."

"Well it wasn't your imagination. That little girl was Sarah Castle. She lived in this house over 150 years ago. What you've been seeing are memories of a previous life. I am the living proof of that. That little girl was me; I am the reincarnation of Sarah Castle. I was part of everything you are now remembering." Carlotta found herself unable to read the stunned Quentin's speechless reaction. He did not protest or question her claims, so she decided to press on. "We are rare people you and I. Not only have we lived before, but we are also fortunate enough to remember. Angelique loves you. She always has and she always will. I still remember that last day." Carlotta's eyes glanced at something far away in the distance. "It was a dark and rainy afternoon. All week long, strange tensions had been building in the house, tensions I did not understand but feared. Everyone did not love my Angelique as I did."

Her memory took her back to a day when she'd been playing with her doll in an empty room. She'd heard footsteps and recognized Gabriel's heavy tread. Although Charles and Angelique welcomed her, the child of the housekeeper, in all of Collinwood's rooms, Gabriel would rudely berate her for being here. She hid partly to avoid a scene but she also wanted to hear what was going to be said. Angelique had asked her to keep her ears open and report all that she heard back to her.

Gabriel had been followed by Quentin's wife, Laura, and the bulldog-faced Reverend Strack. "Gabriel, we must make a decision."

He turned to Laura, petulantly. "I think you've already made that for me. Why else would the good Reverend Strack be here?"

"Where is the witch now?" Reverend Strack demanded.

"Where she always is, in the tower, posing for my husband," Laura answered resentfully.

"Well, Mr. Collins?"

"Why do you want my permission?"

"Angelique Collins is your wife."

Gabriel looked indecisive and fearful. Laura shook her head in disgust. "What a pathetic weakling he is," she thought. Out loud she asked, "Do you want a mob with firebrands outside this house?"

"I promise you it will come to that and soon. The strange death of Reverend Herridge, so soon after his sermon denouncing her."

"But the scandal," Gabriel protested feebly.

Laura suppressed a sigh. "There will be no scandal," she assured him.

"We've selected four men from the estate, each of whom has seen proof of her witchcraft. They have sworn to stay silent forever," Strack announced.

Gabriel was silent, withering under their gaze, wringing his hands. Laura regarded him contemptuously, "Gabriel, if we must, we'll do it without you." Gabriel flinched, as he considered the prospect of making an enemy of Reverend Strack.

Strack waved a gloved fist in his face, sensing the battle was nearly won, "The evil must be driven from the land before it destroys us all."

Gabriel's objections caved in. "You're right, there's no other way," he agreed, reluctantly.

Strack grinned in triumph, revealing ugly, yellow teeth. He strode to the window and signaled to a quartet of men who were waiting by the entrance to Collinwood.

"What of my brother, Charles?"

Strack sneered, "He must learn the lesson of the damned. He shall watch her die." Sarah nearly betrayed her presence with a plaintive cry. She bit her tongue to suppress it. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks as she waited for the trio to exit the room. She waited there for a few minutes, taking care to sob quietly.

She heard her mother calling for her. Taking her by the hand, she started to lead her to her room. Their progress was interrupted by a loud commotion from upstairs. Mrs. Castle gripped Sarah gently but firmly by the shoulders. They watched as Angelique, head held high, descended the stairs. None of her guards dared to touch her. Even Strack held back a respectable distance from her. Gabriel followed behind him, his brow beaded with sweat. Finally, Charles brought up the rear, looking grim, his eyes flashing with the promise of vengeance.

Sarah viciously tore herself from her mother's grasp and ran to Angelique. "NO! I won't let you take her!"

"Sarah, please," her mother pleaded weakly.

"Don't let them do it, Mama! I love her so." Angelique knelt before the child and held her for a moment. Her guards stood back, uncertain of what they should do. They turned to Strack who wore a noncommittal expression.

"My darling, don't cry. Sarah, dear, please don't cry. It will be just as if I've gone away for a little while."

"But they said they were going to ... Charles, don't let them ..." Her voice trailed off as she was overtaken by sobs of despair.

Angelique gently turned her face and stared into the child's eyes. "You'll remember all the time we spent together. All the love we shared ..." She removed a heart-shaped locket around her throat and slipped it around Sarah's neck. "As long as you wear this, you will remember me." Sensing the impatience of her persecutors, she leaned forward and kissed Sarah on the forehead. Then she glanced at Mrs. Castle with a mute instruction to take the child away. Sarah allowed her mother to lead her away from Angelique as the procession attempted to resume its inexorable progress out the front door.

Strack grimaced as the door was opened. A torrential downpour was deluging the grounds. His unpleasant features twisted in a scowl of impatience as he realized the execution would have to be delayed.

Mrs. Castle had led Sarah to her room. Sarah was still sobbing inconsolably. "Lie down on your bed, angel. Please stay here. There's nothing you can do." Reluctantly, she turned to leave, torn by her desire to comfort her daughter and her duty to the family. Sarah dashed after her, clutching her skirt. "Sweetheart, get into your bed and pull the covers over your head. Whatever you do, please stay away from the window." With an anguished look behind her, Mrs. Castle left, closing the door.

Sarah lay there for what seemed like an eternity. Hope welled in her little heart as she heard a chorus of prayers coming from downstairs. All the adults, except Charles and Angelique, were praying for the rain to stop. Determined, she rose from her bed and knelt beside it, as she had been taught and said her own prayer, begging for the downpour to continue. She allowed herself to fantasize that this would be taken as a miraculous sign that Angelique should not be put to death. Over and over, she repeated the impassioned request, hoping that the power of her love would drown out the droning pleas of the "righteous ones" downstairs.

It was all for naught. Sometime later, the clouds became miserly and reduced the life-giving torrents to a slow trickle. From her window, she could hear them proceed outside into the muddy yard. Disobeying her mother's orders, she ran to the window in time to see Angelique calmly climbing a ladder that had been laid against a mighty tree in the yard. A few planks had been lashed to two of the branches to serve as a gallows. She did not struggle as they tied her hands behind her. Two of the hired hands held her as the hangman stood ready. When they finished, he expertly placed the noose around her neck, carefully positioning the knot to break her neck immediately after she fell.

Below stood Strack, the other two henchmen and Gabriel, the latter's eyes darting nervously toward Charles, who looked on seething with barely controlled rage. Laura and Mrs. Castle witnessed from the veranda.

Reverend Strack bellowed up towards the gallows "Angelique Collins, you have been condemned as a witch and you must die. But your spirit will not live after you, for your earthly remains will hang here until your spirit returns to the pits of darkness forevermore."

Angelique glared down at them, "As I die, so shall all of you. For that will be my legacy."

"Oh Lord, thou hast heard her threats, protect us from her evils! Guard with thy invincible strength, for thou knowest we do what we must for thy sake, in thy name, amen!"

Angelique gazed down at Charles. Their eyes locked together one last time. Then she turned her attention to Sarah who was viewing the tableau from her window. Though her lips did not move, everyone present could hear her thoughts, "I have lost him but I will have him again. You will help me, Sarah. You will know when the time comes, for it is your love that will keep me alive."

The spectators shuffled nervously, looking to Reverend Strack. He glared at her, "Prepare yourself for eternity, witch! Let the devil take his own!" He gestured to the hangman, who pushed her from the faux gallows. She dropped about a quarter of the way down the height of the tree. When the rope went taut the sound of her neck breaking was clearly audible to all. Sarah screamed from her window, as she began to sway pendulum like. They watched for about a quarter of an hour. Strack exulted in his momentous accomplishment. The four lackeys silently counted their money and told themselves it was worth it. Gabriel hoped Charles would not kill him as soon as they were alone. Charles grieved and plotted revenge. Laura reveled at the sight of her rival swaying to and fro. Mrs. Castle prayed for the soul of Mrs. Collins, and her daughter sobbed inconsolably upstairs. Finally, everyone was certain justice, or at least Angelique's life, was done, and they went their separate ways.

Later, Sarah stood a silent vigil under the hanging corpse. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she swore, "I will always remember, always, always, ALWAYS!"

Mrs. Castle ran to her daughter, "Sarah, please come inside." She took her daughter by the hand and led her back into the house. "You mustn't be unhappy, Sarah. You must try to forget."

Sarah's eyes no longer harbored any tears, "I'm not unhappy, Mama, because she'll be back. Someday, Angelique will be back ..."

"And I will help her," Carlotta's eyes had almost glazed over as she simultaneously relived and related the experience to Quentin.

Quentin stared at her, trying vainly to disbelieve, "Then her spirit is still alive in this house."

"For certain of us, for me," she paused, "and for you."

"But I'm not Charles Collins."

She smiled tolerantly, "You will come to accept it after a time, and then you will realize something else. There is no longer any place in this house for Mrs. Collins."

Quentin's eye's blazed, "I love Tracy! I'll always love Tracy, and nothing can change that!"

She smiled patiently, almost benevolently. "If you truly believe that, then I suggest you leave Collinwood as soon as possible." She started to exit the room, paused, and turned to him adding, "If you can."

Fuming, Quentin watched her go. For a moment he considered her advice. Why not leave? He could easily board up the house and go. There was a vast world out there, beyond Collinport. He knew that Tracy would leap at the prospect of escaping the mansion. She never said so, but she had not warmed up to Collinwood, and it was unlikely she ever would.

Then his mind turned to practical considerations. Starting over would really mean going back to square one. He did not come from a wealthy branch of the family. His great uncle Quentin had been disinherited, leaving his son, Quentin, Jr. to make his own way in life. When he'd met Tracy, he'd not been a starving artist exactly, but he was far from wealthy.

Most people would assume he was now a rich man, but appearances are often deceptive. He'd inherited very little money. Elizabeth Collins Stoddard had left most of the Collins fortune to her nephew, David. He'd been poised to inherit the house as well, but after the tragic events that had befallen the family, Elizabeth decided that she could not bear to have him reside in what she called "the house of dark shadows." Believing that he could never find peace and happiness at Collinwood, the site of the murders of his father and other family members, Elizabeth sought out the only other Collins left. The cannery, the main source of the Collins income, was left in trust to David. Shortly before Elizabeth's death, David was sent away to be raised by his former governess and her husband. At least, that's what Garner, the family lawyer, told Quentin.

Alex had repeated rumors that were whispered at the Blue Whale. David was not living safely in Ohio. The stories varied, but they all culminated with the claim that he'd been eliminated by whatever evil reigned over Collinwood.

In either event, a minor part of the fortune had been tied up in trust for the maintenance and care of the mansion. Included in that fund was the provision of an allowance for the master of Collinwood. It was a fairly generous sum that would be doled out monthly on the condition that he resided in the mansion for at least nine months a year. While he was at liberty to sell it, the trust fund would never come into his hands. Quentin doubted he could ever find a buyer for the great mansion. It was an expensive white elephant, an extravagant relic of a bygone age.

Then his mind accepted the real obstacle. He did not want to leave. This house was his home, plain and simple. He'd lived in many places; as a boy, he'd been uprooted many times. There had been many houses but never a home. For the first time, he felt like he had one. In an authoritative tone, he announced loudly, "I am Quentin Collins. I am the Master of Collinwood. This house is mine!" His vehemence startled him. He scanned the area, relieved that no one had heard his outburst. Feeling sheepish, but satisfied that a final decision had been reached, he retrieved his brush and returned to his work.

He worked very productively for the better part of an hour and was nearly ready for a break when Tracy strolled in. Although laden down with two bags of groceries, she all but floated into the room. Her countenance was lit with exuberance. "I'm a genius with butchers. Of course, he thinks me quite mad and very rich. The steaks are a masterpiece." Quentin smiled; they were rich, provided they stayed at Collinwood. A dim shadow fell on Tracy's euphoria. "She's back," she exclaimed, pointing to the portrait of Angelique.

"I offended Carlotta's sense of family tradition," he explained with a laugh. Tracy smiled noncommittally. She bit back a retort, wondering who was in charge in this house. Carlotta was only the housekeeper after all. Sensing the slight chill in the mood, Quentin continued, "What was good enough for my forefathers should be good enough for me." He placed his brush on the easel. "What about you and I getting out of this house? We'll take a walk."

"Perfect," she beamed. She shot a final glance at the portrait of Angelique and decided it was not worth quarreling over it. It was after all, only a picture.

They strolled hand in hand in a wonderland of emerging wildflowers. The view reminded Tracy of the poppies scene in **The Wizard of Oz**. The main difference was the vastly increased pallet of colors. Delicate petals glistened as they danced in the gentle breeze. A blend of honey sweet scents beckoned to her as if each bud were calling out to be chosen. She bent over and plucked one, raising it to her nose, inhaling deeply. Quentin's face bore a loving expression. "Do you know how much I need you?" She leaned into his warm embrace. They continued their walk and sat for more than an hour reveling in each other's company. As the sun made its inexorable progress west, they made their way back to Collinwood.

Quentin barbecued the steaks over a charcoal fire. The butcher had seasoned them perfectly for them at no additional charge. Tracy prepared her salad, and they enjoyed a quiet meal al fresco on the

patio. Tracy surprised Quentin with his favorite dessert, strawberry shortcake. Afterward, she playfully fed him a few leftover strawberries. Neither of them noticed Carlotta glaring at them from behind the slight gap between closed curtains in one of the vacant bedrooms.

### Chapter 7

It was later in the evening when the phone rang in the gallery. Alex went to answer it with trepidation. There were only two people who knew this number. "Hello, Tracy? What's wrong?"

"Oh Alex, how gloomy you are. I called to say everything is perfect."

"Are you sure? Did you get into the tower?"

"He's not even painting there anymore. He's his old self again."

"That's great. Listen Trace, Claire and I thought we'd go to New York tonight. I thought we'd stop at the Burton Gallery. He's an authority on early American artists, isn't he?"

"I think he's the best, why?"

"Tell you when we get back. You're sure you'll be ok?"

"Go, Alex, go. Nothing bad will happen to us now."

"Ok honey, bye."

"Bye, Alex, be safe," she returned the receiver to its cradle.

"Who was that?"

"It was Alex. He and Claire have to go to New York for a few days."

"It's late; let's go to bed." It wasn't all that late, and sleep was the last thing on her mind.

"No, you go ahead." He held out a book. "I want to finish this first." Tracy shot him a hurt look making him feel both guilty and annoyed. "Now go on!" he exclaimed more forcefully than he'd intended. He moderated his tone and forced a smile, "I'll be up soon."

"Don't read all night," she tried unsuccessfully to make it sound like light-hearted banter, but the disappointment was all too evident to Quentin. He paced around the room for a few minutes, torn between the temptation to follow her upstairs or to finish his book. He looked out a window but could see nothing in the virtual total darkness.

He sat down, opening the book. His eyes scanned the lines of words, but his attention faltered and the text became a meaningless jumble. Frustrated, he slammed it shut, not even bothering to mark his spot. The truth was, he had absolutely no interest in the book. Again, he considered going upstairs. Tracy was almost certainly still awake. He had a feeling he was being watched. Turning to Angelique's portrait, it seemed as if she were gazing at him. Quentin sat there, transfixed by the image of the long dead mistress of Collinwood. She seemed to be beckoning him to go to the tower. Gradually, he became aware that he was bathed in the blue glow that had emanated from the tower on so many occasions. Feeling as if he were being pulled in opposite directions, he sat there, rigid for many minutes. Part of him, the part that thought of himself as Quentin, wanted to go upstairs and make Tracy's night. The other half, Charles, urged him to make his way to the tower. In the end, Tracy proved to be the stronger incentive. He shook his head to clear his thoughts and headed upstairs to the master bedroom.

"Damn," he thought, "she's already asleep." Annoyance welled within him. He'd told her he'd be up in a few minutes. Why couldn't she wait? He'd intended to go to bed whether she was up or not, but the resentment propelled him out of the room and back into the corridor. He found himself at the landing of the stairs leading to the tower. He looked up, still feeling the siren call. It took a herculean effort, but he willed himself away from there.

He decided a walk was what he needed to clear his thoughts. The moon had risen, casting a pale glow over the yard. The chilly night breeze temporarily blunted the urge to obey the summons to the tower. He sat on the trunk of a fallen tree. A memory washed over his mind, overpowering his concentration. He was riding a horse, Doubloon, through a bank of fog. Clad in a billowing cape, horse and rider were in pursuit of a hefty man who was fleeing for his life. His flight was in vain of course; he was overtaken within seconds. The rider beat him across the face viciously with his riding crop, creating bloody stripes across his face. The horse reared up on command. "You killed her! You killed Angelique, Strack!" The hooves crashed down on the reverend, crushing ribs. Strack raised his hands in a futile effort to defend himself; one of the long bones snapped with a loud crack. Again and again, the hooves

descended upon the screaming minister. At length, his protests and movements ceased as the life slowly ebbed from his body.

Charles Collins viewed the bloody corpse and a crooked grin broke out on his scarred features. It transformed into a joyous smile. Angelique, ghostly but substantial, emerged from the mist, her arms outstretched. Charles dismounted and limped into her embrace.

The memories ceased as suddenly as they'd overwhelmed him. Quentin was once again seated on the log. He peered out into the clear, crisp night at the outline of Collinwood illuminated by the pale glow of the moon. Like a man possessed, he arose and was swallowed up by the great mansion.

Tracy slept fitfully, tossing and turning, tormented by anxieties that had been temporarily stilled by the exuberance of the day she's shared with Quentin. These dormant cares had been simmering beneath the surface of her consciousness and were now creeping out of their hiding places. Gradually, sleep evaporated. She opened her eyes and realized she was alone. She didn't need the clock to tell her that it was very late. Her heart sank; there was a light emanating from the tower. Saturated with trepidation, she sat up, stepped into her slippers and strode off to reclaim her husband.

The flight of stairs was a daunting ordeal, each step up increasing her anxiety. She felt her heart pounding in her chest, the blood roaring in her ears. When she reached the summit, she paused. Haltingly she extended her hand to knock on the door. She halted midway and considered going back to bed. Finally, she summoned up all of her strength and managed to timidly rap on the door. "Quentin!" She could hear movement inside, but there were no sounds of footsteps coming to answer the door. She pounded moderately on the door calling out again, "Quentin!"

The door was suddenly thrown open. Quentin stared down at her mutely. His eyes fixed coldly on her, his visage impassive. Tracy tried to peer into the room. For a split second she saw a daybed with covers in disarray. He moved to block her view. "I ... I thought you said weren't come here anymore." He stood there, immobile, silent. "Quentin, what's happened?" Again there was no reply. She reached out to him, "What's wrong?" She tried again to look behind him. "There's someone else in that room, isn't there?"

Finally he spoke, his voice cold and commanding, "Why don't you go back to bed?"

"Is there someone else in that room?"

He chuckled cruelly in reply, a tight grin marring his features, "Is there someone else in that room?" His voice was low and mocking. Then he exploded, "You make me sick! I can't stand the sight of you anymore. Now get out!" Tracy's head bent down, her chin on her chest. She fought to control the tears that were threatening to well up. She looked up again, hoping for the smallest evidence of penitence for the cruelty that had been heaped upon her. The order was repeated in a quiet, deadly tone, "I said, get out." Tracy bowed her head again and retreated down the staircase. The dam burst; hot salty tears trailed down her cheeks. "Don't you ever let me catch you up here again!" She quickened her pace, nearly tripping down the stairs.

Quentin slammed the door and returned to his easel. Charles' unfinished portrait was the subject of his labors. Considerable material had been added. He raised the brush and continued his work. He stole his attention away from the canvas and gazed at the reclining, opalescent form of Angelique. Her arms were outstretched. "How could I ever have thought you were a dream?" Limping, he crossed the gulf between them.

Tracy was sobbing uncontrollably when she lifted the receiver of the phone and dialed the number for the cottage. As it rang, she prayed that Claire and Alex had not left for New York. Again and again it rang, until she finally admitted defeat and returned to their enormous, lonely bed.

#### Chapter 8

It was midmorning when Tracy finally dragged herself out of bed. Dark circles, evidence of her lack of sleep, surrounded her puffy, red eyes. She sat in the gallery, an untouched cup of coffee beside her, staring at the portrait of Angelique. In the harsh light of day, the notion that she was haunting the halls of the manor seemed ridiculous to her. It would be easier to believe that her husband was insane and in need of medical care. However, every time she'd be on the verge of accepting that Quentin was mad, Angelique's gaze would reach out and snap her mind back from the edge. The picture seemed to be

mocking her, daring her to stay and fight her. Just as Tracy was about to reach out and take her first sip of the rapidly cooling coffee, Carlotta entered the room.

She was carrying a vase of flowers and deigned to favor Tracy with a thin, detached smile, "I thought these might brighten the room." She placed them on the small table beneath HER portrait. "Aren't they lovely?"

Tracy chose not to answer the question. At any other time, she'd have gone over to them to revel in their beauty. In her current mood, she found them drab and unappealing. "Carlotta, where is Mr. Collins?"

"Oh didn't he tell you? He just left for town. He needed some supplies." She flashed the smile again. This time her eyes were bright with triumph. "You do know he's painting in the tower, don't you?"

"Yes, I know", she answered glumly.

"Is something wrong, Mrs. Collins?"

"Yes, Carlotta, something is wrong."

"Anything I've done?"

Tracy bit her tongue. Several retorts came to mind, but she predicted that each and every one would only give the older woman immense satisfaction. "No, never mind."

"What is it Mrs. Collins?" She affected that annoying pseudo, caring manner that made Tracy want to scream in anger. "You don't seem very happy here, whereas Mr. Collins ..."

"I don't think that's any of your business!"

"Certainly, if that's how you feel," she answered with mock contriteness and turned to leave. Pausing, she asked, "What time will dinner be served?"

Tracy's self-control evaporated. "I don't know what ... !" She took a deep breath, struggling to retain her composure, and then finished her sentence "time."

Carlotta completely dropped her subservient façade for a moment. "Mrs. Collins, have you ever stopped to think that perhaps you don't belong here?" As quickly as it vanished, the mask returned. Carlotta lowered her gaze deferentially and retreated to tend to her chores.

Tracy, speechless, watched her exit with mute fury. She opened her mouth to reprimand her for her insubordination, but it was too late. She was gone. "It's probably just as well," she thought. An argument would almost certainly escalate to the point where Tracy would be forced to fire the housekeeper. Ordinarily, nothing would give her greater satisfaction, but with things as they were, she feared that Quentin would countermand any action she made. Dispensing with her services could wait until she had dealt with the real problem, Angelique.

Tracy wasn't sure if the threat she posed was all in Quentin's mind or if she was a tangible rival. Either way, she was certain that she was in mortal combat with the spirit of Angelique for the soul of Quentin Collins. What she needed to know was the true nature of her enemy. Was she fighting madness or a ghost? She knew there was only one place she could find those answers - the tower.

Tracy spied Quentin's jacket thrown carelessly over the back of a chair. Quentin only needed the keys to the car and front door when he was not on the grounds. With luck, the keys to Collinwood would still be in it. She hefted the jacket and was relieved to feel its bulky weight in her hands. Finding the keys in one of the pockets, she wrapped her fist around them and stroke purposefully toward the tower.

Stealthily, she made her way up the stairs. She winced as each creak threatened to betray her presence. The wad of keys presented a challenge, so many and so little time. Each second she spent fumbling with them, trying to find the one to this particular door was an invitation to be caught by Carlotta. She quelled the rising tension. "Why would Carlotta come up here?" she reasoned silently. "She has no business in this part of the house. These stairs led to one room, and she's also forbidden to be here." She tried to feel safe as she, by trial and error, attempted to fit the correct key into the lock.

Despite her attempts to reassure herself, another part of her mind told her that Carlotta always kept tabs on her and would no doubt come looking for her at any moment. Her hands shook so much she nearly dropped the keys. Closing her eyes, she counted to 10 and concentrated on the task at hand. She returned to her labors and let out a deep sigh when the tumblers in the lock finally turned and the door easily slid open.

She was dismayed by what saw in the open doorway. The room was a mess, the floor strewn with empty liquor bottles and debris. The covers on the daybed had been thrown back carelessly, a mute witness to the fact that they'd been slept in. Whether one or two people had been lying on it was impossible to tell and was also the crux of her investigation.

The covered easel commanded her attention. It stood in front of the daybed, the sheet concealing vital answers to her queries. Hesitantly, she reached out and tore the linen away from the canvas, letting it fall to the floor. An involuntary gasp escaped her throat, and her legs threatened to buckle under her. Angelique lay scantily clad, prone on the bed, arms out stretched. She was as ethereally lovely as the image that hung in the gallery. The difference here was the unrestrained passion evident in her features. She was beckoning to a figure that was a dead ringer for Quentin. His attitude was like that of a supplicant to a goddess. His eyes reverently locked on hers. In his arms was an offering, the lifeless body of a woman. The face was unmistakably Tracy's. She closed her eyes, feeling faint.

Fortunately, the moment of crisis passed quickly. The squeal of tires coming to an abrupt halt jolted her. Looking out the window, she saw their car pulling up in the driveway. Quentin hurriedly ran in the front door. "Carlotta, have you seen my jacket? Can't buy a damn thing without my wallet." She decided to stay put; he'd find the jacket and be on his way. The safest course was to wait it out in the tower. Her feeling of relative safety evaporated instantly. "Never mind; I'll check the tower."

Panic welled up in her as she stood stock still in front of the door, praying for a miracle. The sound of his steady tread came closer and closer until she could hear him just outside the door. He patted his pockets and restrained a curse. His keys were in his jacket. Her relief was so great; she almost collapsed into a puddle on the floor. Hastily, she exited the room, grateful she'd thought to keep the tower room key between her forefinger and thumb. The door locked easily, and she made her way back down the flight of stairs. The wood protested her weight no matter how gingerly she tried to step. Each groan made her wince. She was at the foot of the landing and thought she was safe.

Carlotta came around the corner. She coolly regarded Tracy with a smile that masqueraded as subservience. The haughty arched eyebrows betrayed her true feelings. "Mrs. Collins," she said simply. Their eyes locked in complete understanding of each other's intentions. Abruptly, she turned on her heel leaving her alone in the corridor.

She strode purposefully into the gallery. Her only hope was to replace the keys and bluff out a reason why she'd been coming down the stairs. She envisioned a scenario where she defiantly held her ground and essentially called Carlotta a liar and demanded that she be given her walking papers. Sometimes, the best defense is a good offense. The bile rose up in her throat when she realized the jacket was gone.

"Tracy!" Startled, she turned to face her husband. "Have you seen my jacket?"

"No," she managed weakly, the lump of keys a ton of dead weight in her hands behind her back. She fought to keep her voice even, "No, I haven't." Simultaneously, they both spied it on a table opposite them. Tracy raced over to it with Quentin following right behind her. Reaching out, she beat him to the garment. Her attempt to replace the keys in the pocket failed and they fell to the floor with a loud thud. He bent over to retrieve them, and then their eyes locked. Tracy willed herself to meet his gaze and not be the one to look away first. Quentin's expression revealed suspicion as he weighed the evidence. The keys could have fallen out of the pocket. He said nothing as he looked away and headed toward the car.

Tracy exhaled an immense sigh of relief, feeling the crisis had passed. She began to rehearse answers to Carlotta's accusations about her being in the tower. In a giddy moment, she even wondered if perhaps, just perhaps, she'd misjudged the older woman. Maybe she'd mistaken an aloof and detached manner for hostility. She strode over to the window to see her husband drive off and all doubts were exorcised from her mind. She saw Carlotta running to the car speaking conspiratorially to Quentin. The pair looked up toward the tower. Fearing they'd spy her in the window, she shrank back and slunk off to their room.

All the pent up grief, anger, anxiety, and fear welled up in one gushing torrent of emotion. Tears spilled from her eyes and wracking sobs, muffled by her pillow, contorted her prone form. At last, exhaustion from the day's trials overcame her, and she fell into a deep sleep. This state was anything but

restful, tormented as she was by visions of Carlotta chasing her through the labyrinthine halls of the great house. She sought refuge in an empty room only to discover Quentin and Angelique, semi-nude, on a bed together. They were in the middle of a passionate embrace when her screams of anger and dismay disrupted their illicit tryst. Angelique's sea blue orbs sparkled as she emitted the tinkling sounds of mirthless laughter. Quentin was not amused. He arose from the bed, his features hard and cold, as if etched from stone or ice. He approached her with determined fury carved into his features, arms outstretched as he reached for her throat ...

She awoke in near total darkness, bathed in sweat and shivering. Involuntarily, she glanced up at the tower; the light was on. Time seemed suspended and meaningless as she lay there torn, between her desire to flee the room and her fear of what lay beyond its walls.

Eventually the light in the tower was extinguished, and she heard the even tread of Quentin descending the stairs. She rolled over, feigning sleep, uncertain of what if anything, she had to say to her husband. Anger and sorrow battled for supremacy in her mind. On the one hand, she ached to leap at him and batter him with blows, to punish him for his infidelity and betrayal. The rational part of her mind was sympathetic and afraid, believing that he was not responsible for his actions. It argued that whether through supernatural possession or psychological frailty, he had not been acting of his own accord. Essentially, he had been Charles Collins.

The door squeaked open allowing a sliver of light to spill onto her. She feigned sleep, summoning all her self-control to remain still and silent. Quentin stood there, motionless for some time, observing her and trying to discern whether or not she was awake. He pushed it inward, allowing the light from the hallway to illuminate their room enough for him to see her clearly. Slowly he approached the bed and stared appraisingly. Tracy's form became rigid with indecision, conflicted over whether or not to continue the charade or acknowledge his presence. Finally, she opened her eyes and inclined her face upward into his soft and loving gaze.

He lay down beside her and held her tenderly. "It's all right. I know you went to the tower room. It doesn't matter." Tracy had thought she'd spent all her tears, but new ones came, borne of intense relief and joy. "Don't cry," he pleaded gently, punctuating the request with a small laugh. "You're going to flood the place."

He embraced her more tightly. Attempts at a reply were choked off by more sobs. Finally able to compose herself, she whispered, "I've been so afraid. I didn't understand any of it. And then the things you said to me last night."

He avoided her gaze, ashamed. "I didn't mean any of it ..."

"No, I know you didn't." She caressed his cheek. "Quentin, look at me." She reached up and gently compelled him to turn back to her. "Do you love me?"

"God, yes," he whispered and kissed her gently. For the next minute or so, he was just as he'd been since they'd first met, caring, loving, passionate and considerate. He caressed her hair tenderly and then his attentions became more ardent, more fervent. He drew back his head. By degrees, his expression transformed. His loving gaze became harsh and mocking. A crooked grin, taunting and cruel, marred his handsome countenance. He descended, raining savage, lustful kisses upon her. When she struggled, he answered her protests by pawing her mercilessly.

Tracy's joy froze and shattered as he manhandled her. Attempts to remove or redirect his abusive hands were sadly futile. "Quentin, stop it, you're hurting me!" Her complaint was coldly ignored as he squeezed her breast sadistically. "Quentin, please ... don't touch me like that!"

Quentin's face twisted into a repulsive smirk, "What's wrong, Tracy? Don't you like it anymore? You have such a lovely body?"

"Stop it!"

He reached out and sandwiched her face between his hands. "I'll touch you whenever and however I want." He released his grip and sprang from the bed. "If you don't like it, you can always leave!"

Tracy fought hard to quell the rage and resentment she felt toward him and channel it all where it belonged. She called after him, "She's doing this to you! It's her. It's Angelique!" He turned

momentarily, his expression a blank page, before he exited the room. Tracy bounded out of bed and hastily locked the door behind him.

Quentin quickened his pace, his expression revealing the torrent of emotions that broiled within him. As he passed the stairwell leading to the tower, he gazed up, then turned away and moved on. He leaned against the wall, feeling torn and indecisive. He was startled by Carlotta, "Mr. Collins?" He hoped she would go away if he did not answer. Relentlessly she continued. "The Jenkins will be returning soon. If Mrs. Collins is going to leave, she should go before they come back. Otherwise, she will simply run to them. Don't you agree?" He continued to ignore her. "Don't you agree, Mr. Collins?"

Quentin erupted, "Yes, I agree, Carlotta! But I don't need you to tell me what I have to do!" He stormed out leaving her alone in the corridor. She turned and went back to the tower room stairs. Gerard was standing on the lower landing peering down at her questioningly. She nodded to him, and he smiled knowingly in return.

Tracy gazed up at the tower. Despite the fact that there was no light emanating from its window, she could just make out the shapely outline of a woman glaring down at her. Tracy's countenance became determined and intractable. She spoke very softly but firmly, "I know you're up there, but I won't let you have him. I'll never leave! Never!"

The car pulled up to the cottage and came to a stop. Alex emerged carrying a valise and a wrapped painting. He turned to Claire, "Is it too late to see how they are?"

"Alex, it's two in the morning!" Alex reluctantly acceded to his wife's logic. She unlocked the door, and he followed her in. He immediately set the wrapped parcel and the bag down and fixed himself a stiff drink. Claire made her way into the kitchen and called out, "I'm making coffee. You want something to eat?"

"Yeah, what's in the fridge?" He downed a long sip of his drink, set it down and proceeded to rip the paper off of the painting. He stared at it intently until he was interrupted by Claire carrying a tray of sandwiches.

"Coffee's coming," she announced.

He indicated to his drink, "I need this more."

Claire plopped in the chair opposite him, exhausted. "I still don't like being back here."

"Yeah, I know," he agreed.

The painting caught her eye. "I still can't get over the likeness. Charles Collins could be his twin." Quentin's long dead ancestor was posing in front of a magnificent horse. Claire thought his expression revealed a capacity for great cruelty.

"All that Quentin would need is that scar on his cheek, and you wouldn't be able to tell the difference," Alex added.

"I still don't see how showing him that is going to make him leave here."

Alex sipped a drink, "Honey, I've got to break through to him some way. If I can just get him to admit that it's at least more than a coincidence, we've got a shot."

Claire flashed him a resigned smile. "Well, it'll have to wait until morning," she told him rising and heading for the bedroom.

Alex picked up a book he'd been reading on early American artists. He wanted to peruse a chapter dealing with Charles Collins before he followed Claire to the bedroom.

#### Chapter 9

A faint light flickered in the tower. It was not borne of electricity or flame. Angelique shimmered, semi-transparent and insubstantial as she glowered down from the tower. She fumed, indignant and impatient. She'd suffered enough from these intruders. "This house is mine. He is mine." Her energies had been depleted considerably from the effort required to take on substantial form in order to be with Quentin. "Charles," she corrected herself. Her radiance flickered, enraged at the thought of that insignificant little GIRL who dared to challenge her for possession of Charles. Well, he would deal with her; the plan was already set in motion.

Finally feeling strong enough, she willed herself to float out of the tower. When she passed the tree on which she'd been hanged, she vowed that one of her first acts as the reinstated Mrs. Collins would

be to have it cut down. Slowly, but deliberately, she made her way toward the cottage and waffted into an open window. The man, Quentin's friend, was asleep on the sofa, the book he'd been reading having fallen to the floor. Her mouth was set in a cruel smile and her eyes glistened with the hatred she bore for him, his wife, and especially the woman who had usurped her place with Charles. A lamp burned on the table beside the couch. As she silently mouthed an incantation, its brilliance gradually dimmed to a dull glow and soon faded out. As the room darkened, her power grew and gradually her form dissipated into an amorphous cloud that enveloped her sleeping enemy.

Alex began to gasp, his breathing becoming labored. Angelique willed all of her energies into the attack, bringing deadly pressure to bear on his throat and chest. At first he was able to manage painful gasps that allowed precious oxygen into his lungs, but these diminished as she relentlessly concentrated her entire form over him, cutting off his supply of air completely. He thrashed and kicked in a futile effort to extricate himself from suffocating cloud.

"Alex, come to bed," Claire called out sleepily, from the other room. "What time is it?" She frowned, coming to full wakefulness almost instantly. Something wasn't right. A faint glow permeated the room. Puzzled and concerned, she obeyed a sixth sense that informed her that Alex was in trouble and dashed into the living room. "Alex?" Time seemed compressed as she took in the tableau of her husband engulfed in dense, fog-like mist, battling ineffectually for breath. A piercing scream was ripped from her throat, as she stood there, momentarily indecisive.

Finally, her husband stopped moving. The sight of his inactivity and its implications broke the spell. She dashed over to the couch, intending to turn on the lamp and hopefully see a way to save Alex. Her hand overshot, knocking it to the floor. Fumbling in the semi-darkness, her fingers ineptly turned the switch several times. Finally the bulb blazed into life, dispelling the gloom. The mist abruptly dissipated into thin air. Claire shook him violently, "Alex, oh my God, Alex! Please be all right! Alex!" Her prayers were answered; Alex almost immediately began to greedily take in lungfuls of air. It was several minutes before he was breathing normally.

Angelique seethed, temporarily banished from the cottage. She withdrew to a height above the great house, her powers momentarily depleted. The wind carried her soft, mirthless laughter, as Tracy, fully clothed, tossed and turned in bed. Converting retreat into a change of target, Angelique concentrated all of her energies on the sleeping mistress of Collinwood and invaded her dreams. Angelique's laugh grew in strength and intensity, seeping into Tracy's subconscious.

She was looking for her husband and she knew exactly how to find him. "Be quiet and listen for the lilting peals of laughter," she told herself. Anger welled up in her, but little of it was directed at her husband. He was nothing but putty in HER hands. The delicately soft but thorny sound of Angelique's revelry led her to the old pool. There she found what she expected to see, Angelique and her husband reclining by the pool, only now it was pristinely restored, beckoning the lovers to shed their garments for a midnight tryst in its blood warm water. She watched him kiss her passionately, his hand poised to remove the diaphanous silk and expose her exquisite breasts. The move was aborted when Angelique's eyes locked on hers. He turned his head, his visage twisted into a leering, cruel grin. Then they both broke into a chorus of mocking giggling.

Tracy awoke abruptly and sat up in bed. "I won't let you have him ... I won't." Her face set in a determined mask; she arose and headed toward the pool, determined to fight Angelique to the death for her husband.

"It was the most frightening thing I've ever seen," Claire gripped her husband's hand, terrified to let go.

"Claire, I want you to take the car and get out now."

"No, I won't leave you!" Alex opened his mouth, but his next words were aborted. "No, I don't care what you say, I won't leave you alone."

She relinquished her hold on his hand and embraced him, kissing him desperately. He returned the kiss, glumly admitting defeat. "OK."

Claire's manner was matter of fact, "What are we going to do? We can't fight her; she has too much power." She paused, considering her next words carefully. "Alex, maybe we should go to Quentin now."

Alex looked indecisive as he weighed their options. "I don't know; let me think."

As in her dream, Tracy's quest for her husband had led to the dilapidated swimming pool. Since she'd awakened, fear had been a numb thing buried deep within her chest. Determination had permeated her entire form. Concern for her own safety had been dulled like the tissues of the gums under the effect of Novocaine. Those emotions were stirring to life and welled up inside her. "What am I doing here? What?" She resisted the urge to turn tail and run back to the relative safety of her bed. She shook her head slowly; there was no safety anywhere on the estate, and she had no life without Quentin. She summoned up her courage and called out, "Quentin! Quentin! Are you here?" Her calls echoed unanswered for many seconds.

"So, you've come to spy on us, Laura." Quentin's eyes blazed with resentment and cold fury. His tread was slow and uneven; the limp was back. Tracy's eyes narrowed as she searched in vain for any sign of recognition in his visage.

"Quentin, it's me." Her plea had no impact. From his vantage point, she was Laura, the thorn in his side.

"No, Laura. I'm going to make sure you never interfere again," his tone was grim but matter of fact. He continued his advance toward her, his gait labored but determined. Confusion and anxiety morphed into pure, undiluted terror as the gulf between them narrowed and his hand reached out, level with her neck.

Her tone became desperate, "No, Quentin it's me!" His fingers locked around her throat, constricting her breathing. He pivoted, aiming her toward the pool and viciously kicked her into the filthy, tepid water. As she fell, she was able to take in one massive gulp of air before she hit the brackish liquid. Her second attempt at breath took in more water than air. He grasped at her hair, cruelly twisting her head down below the level of the water. She choked back the urge to breathe and clawed his hands desperately attempting to disengage his lethal stranglehold on her. Her nails dug deep into the flesh of his wrists; he relentlessly increased the force of his attack, submerging her head. Her frantic struggles continued for perhaps a minute but then began to gradually diminish with every passing second. Finally, her hands flopped impotently a few times against the surface of the water and then she floated motionlessly. He released his grip on the inert mass and limped away into the night.

Alex's knuckles were white as he steered the car toward Collinwood. His gaze was fixed on the road, so it was Claire who noticed the figure emerging from some trees in front of the swimming pool. Claire pointed and exclaimed, "It's Quentin!"

Alex jammed on the brakes. Claire was poised to open the door and run call out to him. Alex placed a restraining hand on her arm and cautioned, "Don't." Something felt wrong. The expression on his old friend's face worried him. He fished through the glove compartment.

"What was he doing here?"

"I don't know," he answered as he found the flashlight. Claire followed him out of the car and towards the pool. Alex scanned the area, training the beam back and forth. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but he knew Quentin had been here for some reason, and he wanted to know why. Finally the torch illuminated something dark at the bottom of the pool. He held the light still as they tried to figure out what the unidentified mass was. Finally Claire screamed, "It's Tracy!"

Alex dove into the pool immediately. Eyes stinging from the assault of the filthy water, he made his way to the bottom and reached out to her. He silently prayed she was still alive but feared the worst. Summoning every ounce of strength available to him, he grabbed a fistful of her blouse and fought desperately to ascend to the surface. His lungs, unaccustomed as they were to all but the lightest forms of exercise, were begging for life-giving air. Seconds seemed like hours before his head broke to the surface of the pool. Claire reached out and helped him get Tracy out of the water and place her face down on the cement. Desperately, he pounded her back, hoping to force the water from her lungs. Again and again, he pumped her back, praying for any sign of life. An eternity later, a great gush of liquid spewed from

Tracy's mouth and she began to gasp for air. She cleared more water from her airway and greedily inhaled. After a few seconds, her breathing became more regular. Claire held her close, sobbing her name in relief.

Tracy began to shiver uncontrollably, so Alex guided her into the car and drove back to the cottage. Tracy haltingly made her way into the bathroom to take a hot shower. While Claire went to find her something to wear, Alex reached into the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a pistol. He shoved it into Claire's hesitant and reluctant hands, directing her to shoot anyone who came in unannounced. She resisted the urge to ask if that included Quentin. After assuring him that she'd double lock the doors, Alex turned to leave.

He tore out of their driveway and brought the brakes to a squealing halt underneath the portico at Collinwood in record time. The driver's side window nearly shattered when he slammed the door shut. Red-faced and fuming, he stabbed at the doorbell button. He paced impatiently for a few seconds before vigorously pounding on the door. The urge to put a fist through a glass window was resisted but only barely. He jabbed at the doorbell a final time before he saw Carlotta peering out tentatively, her expression betraying more than a little concern. "Open the door!" he bellowed and recommenced his pounding.

She opened the door a crack, opening her mouth to speak. Alex didn't give her the chance. Flinging the door wide open, he barged in. Carlotta had barely enough time to back off and avoid being trampled. "I'm going to see him! Where is he?"

"Mr. Jenkins ..." she managed. "They're asleep."

"Quentin! Quentin!"

Gerard came barreling down the stairs arms outstretched, preparing to grab hold of Alex. Alex sidestepped and pushed Gerard aside. The two grappled for a moment before Quentin interrupted. "Leave him alone," he ordered Gerard.

"We tried to stop him," Carlotta called out.

"You didn't succeed, Quentin! She's still alive!"

"What are you talking about, Alex?" Quentin's look of puzzlement caught Alex off guard.

"Are you going to try to tell me you don't know what you did tonight?"

"I didn't do a damn thing. I've been painting all night. Now, what are you so upset about?"

"You tried to drown Tracy!" The two men stared at each other. Quentin's look of incredulous disbelief convinced Alex. "Then it wasn't you, Quentin. It was Charles Collins drowning his wife all over again." Quentin's attempt at a reply was trampled on by Alex. "For Christ's sake, will you listen to me! She's at my place right now! You've got to get out of this house!" Quentin stood mutely staring off into space. Alex pressed on, "Quentin, all you have to do is come with me. Tracy understands."

Quentin regarded him with a stony as he tried to digest what he'd been told. He turned to Carlotta. "Where's Mrs. Collins?" he asked coldly.

She arched her eyebrows, "I'm sure she's in her room."

Quentin did an abrupt about face and launched himself up the stairs, "Tracy! Tracy!" Mocking silence greeted him in the empty bedroom. The carelessly strewn covers testified to Tracy's absence. He pursed his lips in a tight grin and made his way back down the stairs. Alex was waiting, his expression one of desperate hopefulness. Quentin mustered a supreme effort to keep his voice deadly calm and even. "You're right. She's gone. If that's the way she wants it, it's fine with me."

Alex reached out to lightly grip Quentin's elbow, "Quentin, that's not ..."

He batted Alex's arm away and interrupted, "Alex, now listen to me. I've known you a long time." His expression hardened. "I'm sick of your insane writer's mind. I don't want to talk about it anymore. I just want you to get out of here and take her with you." Alex stared in disbelief for a moment before he nodded grimly and turned to leave. Quentin stood alone at the top of the stairs looking down on Gerard and Carlotta. She looked back, her stoic mask barely concealing the triumph that churned beneath it. Quentin glared contemptuously at her as he passed her and made his way to the decanter of brandy.

There was a nagging stinging sensation on his right arm. He rubbed it absently with the left hand and reached out for the brandy. Lifting the glass to his lips, he drank the fiery liquid deeply, relishing the

way it scalded its way down his throat. His right forearm began to complain again. He unbuttoned the sleeve of his shirt, bared the wrist and stared down in disbelief. Angry red scratches covered the skin of his arm along with deep crescent moon indentations. The evidence was irrefutable, claw marks. He turned to Carlotta and fixed his piercing blue eyed gaze upon her. "He was telling the truth, wasn't she?"

"You did it for her," she answered simply, "for Angelique."

"I tried to kill my wife," he replied, his tone flat. He paced the room trying to accept the enormity of the revelation. He'd tried to drown Tracy, the woman he loved more than life itself. Carlotta eyed him solicitously, waiting for his next order. The urge to snap at her was overwhelming, but he knew if he did, he might lash out at her physically. He continued to pace, trying to ignore her toadying gaze. Abruptly, he had the feeling that something was wrong; something was missing. What was it? He fired a question at Carlotta, "Where's Gerard?" She answered him with icy silence. "Where is he?" he demanded insistently.

"Doing what you know has to be done."

"No!" A cold gust of wind brushed his cheek. He turned and peered up the stairs. Angelique hovered, ethereally beautiful and demanding. "I am not Charles Collins, and I won't allow them to be hurt!" With that he broke into a run toward the cottage.

#### Chapter 10

Alex's lead foot hit the gas. The windy road was treacherous at night, but he was unmindful of the danger. A sixth sense was warning him that his trek to Collinwood had played right into Angelique's hands. His leaving had left Claire and Tracy at the mercy of whatever she had to throw at them.

Suddenly, he was blinded by two beams of intense light shining directly in his eyes. He narrowly kept his car from careening into the trees before he passed a jeep that was idling on the roadside. It was immediately recognizable as Gerard's. Alex sped up hoping to lose him. Gerard sped off wildly in pursuit. Within seconds, he was immediately behind Alex's vehicle, ramming it from behind. Only Alex's excessive speed prevented serious damage. "Son of a bitch," he cursed as his taut fingers gripped the wheel, twisting it wildly, each time barely avoiding a collision. The road widened a bit, and Gerard used the opportunity to accelerate and maneuver his vehicle parallel to Alex's. The heavier jeep sideswiped Alex, forcing him off the road. Alex swerved to avoid trees, but was helpless as he plunged down a steep, rocky ravine. There were too many trees now and no way to avoid all of them. He plunged his foot down heavily on the brake and prayed he would stop in time. The hood crumpled under the impact, but Alex's quick thinking had saved his life. He sat dazed but essentially unhurt as Gerard sped away into the night.

Tracy huddled near the fire, rubbing her hands in an attempt to expel the numbing cold that had invaded her fingers. Claire entered the room, "Oh, God, when is he coming back?" Tracy had no answer for her. "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, a little better, I'm still a little cold. Claire ..."

Claire raised a finger cutting off Tracy's sentence, "Shh!" She cocked an ear listening to something.

"What's the matter?"

"I heard something outside."

"What are you going to do?" Tracy whispered.

Claire pulled a revolver out of her pocket and she hefted it inexpertly. "Alex told me to shoot anyone who tries to get in here."

"What did you hear?"

"I know someone's out there." Grimly she pointed the gun ahead of her and tiptoed nervously towards the door. Tracy followed close behind her absentmindedly chewing on a nail. Claire reached out, her hand slightly shaky, to open the door. Framed in the doorway, she glimpsed Gerard's sneering, menacing features. His lascivious look of triumph morphed instantaneously into alarm when he noted the glinting gun barrel pointed at him. Claire squeezed the trigger and a bullet exploded from the weapon. Gerard's hands rose to clutch his face, and then he was gone. "Oh God, I've killed him!"

"If he's just wounded ... We've got to be sure," Tracy asserted reluctantly. Claire nodded hesitantly. Neither woman was eager to venture outside, but they both felt compelled to check Gerard's

condition. Claire pointed the gun ahead of her and cautiously made her way outside with Tracy in tow. As silently as possible, they crept around the perimeter of the cottage but found no sign of Gerard. Tracy whispered, "I know we hit him."

Claire's mind raced. There was no sign of him, not even a drop of blood. She began to feel very vulnerable out in the open and regretted the decision to abandon the comparative safety of the cottage. "Quick, I think we'd better get back inside." They both abandoned all attempts at stealth and broke into a run through the open door. As soon as they were inside, Claire slammed and bolted it shut.

Tracy asked, "What do you think we should do?"

"I don't know, I know we hit him." She opened her mouth to say something else, but the words were replaced by a piercing scream, one which Tracy echoed. A very bloody Gerard, eyes glowing with hatred, glared and reached out for them.

Quentin sprinted down the path toward the wrecked car. Alex looked quite a bit the worse for wear. His forehead was already sporting a bruise from its impact with the steering wheel, but he was essentially intact. "Quentin, I can't get the door open!" Quentin nodded and put all of his might into forcing the passenger door ajar. After a few mighty heaves, it finally gave way, and he and Alex raced back to the cottage.

They found Claire, bruised and her clothes disheveled, sobbing on the floor. Alex stooped to comfort her while Quentin ran from room to room. "Where's Tracy?"

"It's Gerard ... he's got her. He tried to kill us ..."

Gerard brought the jeep to a stop in the woods where it was partially camouflaged by the dense foliage. The blood was still running freely down his face as he regarded Tracy lasciviously. She tried to inch away but found her progress impeded by a snakelike arm that had coiled around her shoulders. Her screams were muffled as he reached around and clamped his hand over her mouth. As he leaned in, she caught the whiff of some of Quentin's expensive brandy on his breath. His other hand cupped her knee familiarly as he leered at her, grinning crookedly. His hand began to progress slowly but determinedly up her thigh. Tracy batted the hand away but was pulled in close for a brutal embrace. Gerard kissed her hard, ignoring her attempts to push him off her. Tracy flailed wildly in panic, her arm bashing against the horn repeatedly. Gerard lost his grip on her when he attempted to restrain her thrashing arm. Tracy began to scream wildly for help.

Quentin had left the cottage and was searching for her when he heard the commotion. "Tracy! Tracy, where are you?"

Gerard had succeeded in restraining Tracy, one arm holding her in a crushing grip, the other covering her mouth and nose, aborting any attempts to scream. Tracy managed a few pitiable whimpers and was forcibly silenced by Gerard.

Quentin paused, trying to locate the area from which the sounds of his wife's struggles had come. He began to make his way toward the general direction of the jeep, but the vehicle was still invisible to him.

Gerard had tired of the struggle with Tracy and decided to be rid of her for the moment. Flinging the door open, he hurled her out of the jeep as he brought the engine to life. The wheels screeched as they peeled out onto the road, the vehicle careening toward Quentin. Tracy yelled, "Quentin, look out!"

Quentin sprinted off the road and into the woods as the jeep barreled after him. Gerard made a valiant attempt to follow, but the cluster of trees was too dense. Quentin dove into a ditch as Gerard lost control of the machine and rammed it into the trunk of a tree.

The tables had turned. Quentin was scrambling to his feet with blood in his eye. Gerard thought it prudent to beat a hasty retreat out of the area and regroup. Throwing open the door, he fled with Quentin in hot pursuit. Gerard made his way back to the road and ran in the direction of the river. Peering over his shoulder, he observed that Quentin had already begun to close the distance between them, gaining on him steadily. On an instinctual level, he realized that this was a race he could not win. If it continued, he'd exhaust himself and be easy prey for his pursuer. He continued to make his way to a railroad footbridge. He was about halfway across when he decided to turn and make his final stand there.

Quentin's face registered triumph when he saw Gerard turn; he was quite confident he'd beat the recalcitrant handyman to a bloody pulp before he turned him over to the police. Then Gerard produced the wicked knife from his belt, sobering Quentin. The blade glinted in the moonlight. Undeterred, Quentin continued to advance on him, albeit quite a bit more cautiously. The two hovered around each other for a few moments, neither eager to make the first move. Gerard feinted a few times, swinging the knife noncommittally at Quentin, keeping him at bay. Quentin in turn made a few aborted attempts to try to wrest the knife from Gerard's grip but retreated when the knife arced to close to him.

Finally, Gerard lashed out at Quentin, nearly slicing open his stomach. Quentin had stepped back in the nick of time, dodging the blow. His hands snaked out, both fists locked on Gerard's wrist. The two began a deadly tug of war with the knife, each trying to plunge the blade deep into his opponent. Gerard's free hand sought out Quentin's face, desperately clawing at it. Rotted wood beneath Quentin's foot caved in, causing Quentin to lose his balance and collapse to the ground. He was barely able to maintain his grip on the knife as Gerard descended upon him. The knife was now aimed at Quentin's face, inching closer and closer with each passing second. Gerard grunted furiously propelling all his force into a vicious jab at Quentin's face. Quentin turned his head slightly, saving his eye. The knife tore his cheek open. Gerard brought his arm back to slash his throat.

"Gerard!" He turned and saw Tracy coming at him wielding one of the planks that had come loose from the rickety bridge. The wood hit him full in the face. The force of the blow threw him backward against the flimsy railing. He screamed as he hurtled to his death, his fall momentarily delayed by some high tension wires. His agony continued for a few more seconds as he was engulfed in electricity before the lines gave way and he continued to plummet to the tracks below.

Quentin held Tracy to him tightly. Alex had joined them and was peering cautiously down at Gerard's prone form. "It looks like the old B and M will be running late tonight," he commented sardonically.

### Chapter 11

They made their way back to the estate with Tracy assuming their destination was the cottage. Along the way, Alex was reunited with a very relieved Claire. The two of them hung back to give Quentin and Tracy some privacy. Quentin held her close. "I'm sorry, Trace. I'm sorry for everything that's happened." Her loving gaze informed him that the apology was unnecessary. "I've got to go back, Tracy," he informed her, his voice full of fear and regret.

"Oh, Quentin, please ... please don't go back in that house."

He gazed at her, never loving her more than he had in that moment. He considered his words very carefully before he attempted to explain. "Tracy, try to understand the way I feel. I have such a tenuous hold on myself that ..."

"But you're all right now," Tracy interrupted. "You're all right."

"But I don't know how long I'll stay this way. There's only one way to end it. We've got to go back in there and face it down."

Tracy nodded reluctantly but in full agreement. "What about Carlotta?"

"I don't think we'll find her," Alex answered. Tracy shivered as she looked up and saw the moonlit silhouette of Collinwood looming menacingly over them.

The quartet was observed from the tower room as they trudged determinedly through the onyx night toward Collinwood. Cold fury mixed with fear coursed through Carlotta's veins. Things were not going well at all. Quentin, CHARLES, was not supposed to be fighting his destiny. Rather, he'd been expected to embrace it. The meddling trio should have been dispatched by now, and order would have reigned in Collinwood, order and Angelique. This would simply not do.

Alex reached out to open the front door, but Quentin placed a restraining hand over his. Alex glanced up, puzzled. "Alex, there's something in there we've got to find."

"What are you talking about?" Alex wanted to know.

Quentin paused, obviously struggling to recall something. "In a dream I had, Gabriel threw Charles into a dark room. I remember when he hit the floor, he fell over something wooden. Before I could see what it was, Gabriel bolted the door."

"Do you remember anything else?"

"No," he paused and then corrected himself. "Only a sound and I can't even describe it, but I know I've heard it before."

Well, where do we start?"

Quentin's expression took on a faraway aspect, "The room had a heavy door ... It was much heavier than anything I've seen in the house."

"You've been everywhere?"

Quentin nodded. "Everywhere except the cellar," Tracy offered reluctantly. The thought of venturing into to the bowels beneath Collinwood chilled her. Quentin's eyes lit up. The room Charles had been imprisoned in had a dungeon-like quality. Quentin led the way into the house and reached for the light switch. The darkness was not dispelled.

"Perfect," Alex spat, "no lights."

Tracy pointed, almost invisible in the near darkness. "There are candles in there," she announced, pointing to a storage closet. Each one of them grabbed candelabra, and Alex produced some matches and applied flame to each candle. That taken care of, they made their way toward the cellar door. Quentin paused at the landing of the tower room stairs. "I have the terrible feeling that if I relax my will for just a second, it'll be all over..."

"We'll go up there, Quentin. You and Tracy stay as far away from that tower room as possible." Claire's hand exerted pressure on Alex's, and she nodded vigorously in firm assent. Quentin nodded, and the Jenkins ascended the stairs. Quentin watched them for a moment and then led Tracy to the basement.

The dank, fetid air assaulted their nostrils, making it hard to breathe. Tracy's face screwed up in disgust as she batted away a spider's web and rubbed the residue of it off her hands. Now and then they could hear the scurrying of fleeing creatures. Tracy nearly bumped into Quentin when he stopped abruptly, "What?"

"Something familiar about all this ..." Quentin opened a storage room door and peered into its depths.

Tracy wandered away and tried another door. She entered and looked around. "There's nothing in here." Her mouth puckered into a confused and frightened "O" shape; a gust of wind materialized suddenly, from nowhere. The foul, death reeking mass of air blew the door shut. She screamed and launched herself toward the exit, desperately trying to work the uncooperative knob. Miraculously, a few of her candles remained lit.

Quentin called out to her from the other side of the door, "Tracy!"

"Quentin!"

"Yes, I'm here. Are you OK?"

"Yes," she answered the tone of her voice uncertain.

"The damn thing's stuck. Push on the inside!"

Tracy exerted all of the force she could muster against the door; it adamantly refused to budge.

"Come on Trace, harder!"

"I'm pushing ..." she protested, unable to finish the sentence. Inexplicably, a cloud of mist gathered around her. Tracy would not have thought it possible, but the air actually became fouler. The room had been in near darkness, with only a couple of candles still lit. The level of light had brightened considerably from something behind her. She turned and opened her mouth to emit a piercing, blood-curdling scream.

Angelique, semi-transparent, was floating toward her. Her twin moon eyes seethed with fiery hatred as she advanced relentlessly toward Tracy. Her mouth formed a cruel smile as she willed the mist to gather and concentrate around Tracy's head and torso. Breathing became difficult as the oppressive fog increased, cutting off her air. Angelique closed the gap in a leisurely pace; she was relishing her victim's terror and suffering and wished to prolong it. Gradually, she relaxed her will and her form began to melt into mist and joined the mass that was already suffocating Tracy.

From the other side of the door, Quentin called out frantically, "For God's sake, Tracy!" What is it, Tracy? Answer me!" Quentin felt as if his heart stopped when Tracy's screams were abruptly muted.

He gripped the knob and pulled with all of his might. The muscles and sinews in his shoulder and arms felt as if they were about to tear apart, but the door remained steadfastly closed.

He prepared to attempt it again when he was interrupted by Claire. "Where's Tracy?"

"She's in there! We've got to get her out!" Quentin and Alex joined forces and managed to heave the door open. Their intrusion broke Angelique's concentration and her spell. They found Tracy inert on the floor surrounded by a quickly dissipating mist. "Oh my God," Claire screamed, "it was the same thing!"

For a moment Quentin feared the worst, but she stirred as the last of the fog vanished. He knelt and held her close. He winced when he saw the haunted, glazed look in her eyes. "You're going to be all right," he assured her soothingly. Gradually, her eyes focused and her muscles relaxed. She reached out to pull Quentin in closer.

"It was so horrible! She was here! She was here!" Quentin prayed she wouldn't descend into hysteria. He felt a surge of annoyance bubble up in the bowels of his soul, a reminder that Charles Collins was still there, a part of him. He forced his mind to concentrate on Tracy, on her fear, her hurt, and the blackness was dispelled, replaced by love and concern. Finally, Tracy favored him with a weak but radiant smile and struggled to her feet.

Quentin helped her up, and surveyed the room. There was something familiar about it. That scratchy, grating sound from his dream was haunting him again. For some reason, Gerard's visage also loomed into view of his mind's eye. The others eyed him quizzically as he snatched up his candelabra and began to inspect the room. It was just an empty room, four walls of naked brick. There was nothing special about it. Then the connection exploded into his consciousness. Bricks! When he'd first seen Gerard he was laying bricks! "That's it! That's it, the sound of bricks being laid!" He pointed to the far wall. "Charles Collins is in there!"

Quentin and Alex raced to find tools and frantically began to tear the wall apart. It should have been exhausting work, but they were too pumped up with adrenaline to care. Their labors revealed an iron door that had been concealed behind the masonry. The bolt was desiccated with rust and easily snapped off. The two men forced the groaning, protesting hinges open and burst inside. The flickering illumination of their candles revealed a skeleton clad in rotting rags and ... a plain pine box fit for no one but a pauper. There was no doubt in their minds who had been interred in it. "So this is why Laura was laughing at the funeral. They were burying an empty coffin." Quentin commented sadly. The memories of Charles Collins' last hours on earth were fighting their way back to his consciousness. He'd experienced every second of the panic and despair Charles had felt when he'd been consigned to this darkness, to suffocate slowly, buried alive. Again, he summoned a herculean effort to quell those memories. They were not productive now and might allow Charles to supplant his will.

"We have to bury them. It's the only way they'll have peace." Alex advised. Quentin nodded.

"I saw a trunk that looked empty in the hall. It could serve as a coffin for Charles," Claire suggested. The men nodded and the four of them set about the grisly task of laying the bodies to rest. While Claire and Alex fetched the trunk, Tracy found some gardening gloves and collected the bones, laying them as respectfully and reverently as possible into the trunk. Quentin did not offer relieve her of the task. There was an unspoken agreement; he would not go near the bones of his ancestor.

Quentin and Alex each took one end of Angelique's coffin, while Tracy and Claire took hold of the trunk. They transported their burdens out to the garage and placed them onto the bed of a pickup truck that had been used by Loomis, the former caretaker. They piled shovels on as well and made their way to the old cemetery. Quentin and Alex labored in silence, digging two graves. The coffin and the trunk were buried side by side. After the last clod of dirt was patted into place, Quentin cleared his throat. "Should we say something, a prayer or eulogy?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. A battle raged in each of them, the forces of pity and forgiveness versus the resentment and rage they felt toward their tormented oppressors. Finally, it was Tracy who spoke up, "We hope to bury the pain and torment we've all experienced here at Collinwood. We pray that you will find peace and rest and that we may be free to live and love away from the darkness

and terror that has been inflicted upon us." Her voice trailed off; no one else could think of anything else. They settled for a chorus of amen and returned to Collinwood.

"Well, that's it. Let's get our stuff and get out of here," Tracy pleaded.

"It's not that easy," Quentin told her gently. Her face fell. "I still feel Charles tugging for dominion over my soul."

"But if we leave ..."

"He'll always be fighting the temptation to come back," Claire surmised.

"And I'll be fighting the urge to do away with you." Tracy's eyes widened in horror.

"We have to exorcise their spirits, send them to the realm of the dead," Alex announced.

"How do we do that?" Tracy wanted to know.

"A séance," Claire and Alex prescribed in unison.

"I had hoped that piling dirt on the corpses would be the end of it," Tracy lamented with a pout that Quentin would have found adorable if not for Charles' influence. As it was he had to resist the temptation to berate her and command her to cease her sniveling and whining. He bit his tongue and the urge passed.

They communed around a table in the gallery, placing their hands on the table, fingers touching, forming a circle of fellowship. The flickering candlelight cast eerie shadows onto each of them. "I'm not sure what to do," Quentin stated, uncertainly.

"Just do as we told you. If Angelique appears to anyone, it'll be you," Alex advised.

Their faces were all scrunched in concentration. Quentin cleared his throat, "Is there anyone who wishes to speak to us, who has anything to say to us? We are here to listen to you. The psychic door is open for you to enter." His summons went unanswered. "We want to help whoever is in this house. That is all. We know you are troubled ... Let us try to help you." Quentin shuddered visibly, his eyes widening.

Alex whispered, "Is she here?"

Quentin nodded. "I know you're here, Angelique. I know you're with us. Now you must listen. You must leave us alone. We know that you were not a witch, that your death was unjust. We have found your bodies, yours and Charles. We have buried them in holy ground."

The candlelight was reflected back faintly by an amorphous shape. At first, he was unable to discern what it was. Gradually, it became obvious that a white mist was gathering in their midst and was concentrating to form the outline of Angelique's features. "Come with me." It was both a plea and a command.

The others were puzzled and wondered what Quentin was seeing and hearing. Alex queried, "What is it?"

Quentin did not dare to answer. Contact had been made, and he was not about to risk breaking the connection. "I am not Charles Collins. You do not love me. Let go of me. Your spirit is free to leave this house, never to return here, where you have had such unhappiness. You and Charles must go ..." Angelique's image was starting to diminish, becoming faint and indistinct again. Quentin continued his tone soothing, "Join each other in a world where there is no death or hatred. Go with my love. Go forever. Go. Go. Go." The mist was no longer recognizable; it had become merely a faint blob. It continued to dissipate until only the faintest wisps were still discernible.

"NO! You must not send her away!" All eyes were diverted to the balcony above. Carlotta glared down at them with insane fury in her eyes. "I will not let you!" Quentin gasped, his eyes rolling back in their sockets. He crumpled to the floor in an inert heap.

Tracy screamed, "Quentin!" They all leapt from their chairs and knelt down beside him.

"GET OUT OF THIS HOUSE! Take him with you if you must, but GET OUT!" Veins visibly bulged on her scarlet forehead.

Alex got to his feet. "Let go of her, Carlotta. You have no right to hold her back!"

"No! NO!"

"You must let her go!"

Carlotta shot him a final defiant glare and fled from the balcony.

Alex left the women to tend to Quentin and bolted out of the room after Carlotta. He knew with absolute certainty where she was headed and bounded up the stairs to the tower room. It was empty, but the door to the parapet was wide open. He fought the shortness of breath and took the stairs to the roof three at a time and emerged to find Carlotta cornered by the low wall that separated the roof from the long drop below. She regarded him with cold fury, contempt, and fear. "Stay away from me! Don't touch me!"

"We don't want to hurt you, Carlotta."

Carlotta glanced over the side. "She needs me." When she turned her attention back to the ground below, she spied the glowing figure of Angelique, arms outstretched, beckoning to her. Alex advanced slowly, determined to help her. Carlotta did not hesitate. In one fluidly deft movement, she leapt up and over the low rim and plummeted silently toward the open arms of the woman she loved.

Quentin came to the second Carlotta hit the ground. The moment his eyes opened, Tracy gathered him in her arms, holding him close. "It's over, Tracy. It's over!" His mind and soul finally felt free of the dark influence of Charles Collins.

The next few days were a blur of tedious questions and red tape. Quentin's wounded cheek had been tended to, and the authorities were informed of the deaths. They gave a sanitized version of the events to Sheriff Patterson. They explained that Gerard had been obsessed with Tracy and had attempted to kidnap her. Quentin and Alex had pursued him and had killed him in self-defense. Carlotta, distraught over the actions and death of her nephew had committed suicide. Patterson did not protest, but they had the impression he was skeptical. He asked a few questions but did not make any serious effort to poke holes in their account of the events. He just seemed relieved when Quentin asked to be directed to a realtor.

Alex had almost finished packing their belongings into their nearly brand-new car. The vehicle had belonged to Elizabeth Stoddard's daughter, Carolyn. Quentin had had to twist his arm, but he finally convinced Alex to buy it for a dollar. The Jenkins' automobile had been totaled, and Quentin felt responsible for it and many other things. Alex was finally persuaded to accept it as a replacement for the one he'd lost.

Claire was talking to Tracy when Quentin pulled into the driveway. He emerged beaming. "OK, everything's taken care of. As of this very moment, all this grandeur's for sale!"

"Don't look so sad, Quentin. Think of all the money you'll have," Claire teased.

"I'm not going to count on it," Quentin retorted, glumly.

Alex emerged from the cottage with the last few odds and ends. "OK, the reservations at the Cape are all set. I told them we'd be there at seven."

"Come on, Alex, it's going to take more than three hours," Quentin chided.

"Not with me leading the way, buddy."

Tracy broke in, "You're right, not with you leading us, I'll tell you that. I don't need any more excitement. We'll meet you there."

Quentin was heading for his car when Alex batted him lightly on the back. "Hey, how many stitches?"

"Six."

"Will there be a scar?"

"The doctor said I'd have waited any longer there would've been."

"You know, I never told you how worried I really was."

"You didn't have to."

"No, no, that's not what I meant. I was afraid the exorcism wouldn't work."

"Why?"

"Because I had this funny feeling it was really you who was keeping her spirit alive."

Quentin laughed, "Well, I'm glad you were wrong. Have the lobsters ready!" Alex grinned and nodded in return before they both got into their cars. Alex pulled out first, with Quentin following close behind. When they came to the fork in the road, Alex went left, toward Collingsport and eventually Cape Cod. Quentin abruptly turned right onto the path leading back to Collinwood.

"What are you doing?" Tracy asked uneasily.

"I have to pick up my canvases."

Tracy fought hard to quell her uneasiness and exasperation. She wondered how he'd managed to forget to retrieve his paintings.

"Hey, come on Trace, it'll only take a minute."

Tracy bit her lip as they drove in silence. A measure of relief washed over her when she remembered that she'd seen the paintings in the bedroom, he'd have no need to go to the tower. In an effort to dispel her remaining nervousness, she decided to break the silence. "It'll be nice at the Cape."

"Yeah, I'll be happy to get out of this place," Quentin agreed. "Won't you?"

Tracy nodded curtly, "Don't be too long in there, all right?"

Quentin pulled up under the portico and nodded, "It'll just take a minute."

"OK," she replied quietly.

Quentin smiled as he slammed the door shut and fumbled for the key to the front door. The house was deathly silent. Although it was still brightly lit, the late afternoon sun was descending and had begun to cast shadows that heralded the coming of night. He felt his stomach stir queasily, and the hairs on his neck prickled, standing upright. Spurred on by the bout of nerves, he dashed inside and made his way through the gallery and into the master bedroom. Snatching up the canvases, he strode purposefully back through the gallery, past the watchful gaze of the portrait of Angelique. He stopped abruptly in the corridor. A faint creaking broke the deathly silence. The sound emanated from a door opening at the end of the hall. Something emerged; a figure stood in the shadow of the open threshold.

Tracy bit her nails while she waited. Anxiety began to weigh down upon her again. She tried to tell herself that there was nothing to worry about. The ghost of Angelique had been exorcised, and her husband was not Charles Collins. She exited the car and looked up, hoping to catch a glimpse of Quentin in one of the windows. There was no sign of life. Frustrated, she turned back to the car and reached in to tap the horn a few times. When Quentin did not answer the summons, she decided to go inside after him.

The total silence was eerily oppressive. Carlotta could no longer be heard tending to her chores. The grandfather clock had stopped ticking, suggesting that time itself had been suspended. Even more disturbing, she could not hear Quentin's heavy tread anywhere in the house. "Quentin!" His name echoed throughout Collinwood's many rooms. He did not answer. "Quentin!" Again, she was answered only with mocking silence. Exasperated, and trying to dismiss the panic that was germinating inside her, she strode to the gallery. "Quentin, what's taking you so long?" Puzzlement formed on her face as she looked down on the canvases that sat near the doorway to the bedroom. She peered in, no sign of Quentin. She turned and entered the gallery.

A dark form sat in the chair by the window. "What are you doing?" she remonstrated. "Quentin, will you come on, I've been waiting for you." There was no answer. "Now why were you just sitting there when you knew ...?" The figure rose, eclipsing the sunlight, bathing in shadows. "Quentin, what's the matter?" He started to cross the gap between them. His tread was uneven and irregular. "Quentin? Why are you limping? What happened?" His face became visible once he left the direct path of sunlight. A jagged scar marred his handsome features. "Your face, what did you do to it?"

She heard something behind her. It was the rustling of fine fabrics and the light, feline tread of Angelique entering from the master bedroom. Now solidly flesh and blood, she regarded Tracy with a cold smile of mocking triumph, blocking any chance of an exit. "Oh, no," she whimpered backing up against the wall. "Oh God, no!" she screamed as Charles advanced relentlessly upon her. "No, no, no, no!" She continued to scream, as his glaring, hate filled visage loomed ever closer. Angelique's insidious, tinkling laughter filled the room. Despair paralyzed her; she did not struggle as he clamped his viselike hands around her throat, constricting her breath.

UPI Dateline 3 July, Collinsport Maine

Holiday weekend casualties ... popular husband and wife novelist team Claire and Alex Jenkins, died today in an automobile accident on the Maine Turnpike. A witness, Leo Humphrey, told the state police that, before the crash, the car suddenly filled with thick, white smoke. Their best-known novel

**THE GHOST AT CORINTH BEND** is presently being made into a major motion picture. The Jenkins started...